

A Good Word



A Pride and Prejudice Variation

By Kimberlyn Wyn

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Based on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

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Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Acknowledgements
About the Author

"I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy."

Chapter 1

New to the small but lively countryside of Hertfordshire, Mr. Bingley immediately captured the attention of the county's many nosy inhabitants. It helped that he was a charming, single man in possession of a good fortune, and that many a family had daughters in want of a husband. He was deemed a more than eligible match by a great number of fathers, who were not opposed to using their welcoming visits as an opportunity to throw in a good word or two about any daughter of theirs that they would have liked to marry off to the man. Mr. Bennet of Longbourn was one of these fathers.

"Yes, my Jane is a great beauty," acknowledged Mr. Bennet.

A small group of men were waiting on Mr. Bingley, and one of the daughterless ones had mentioned how exquisite, kind, and charming the ladies in Hertfordshire were, especially the five Bennet sisters.

"My wife certainly declares it at every opportunity, and I do not disagree. However," continued Mr. Bennet, looking directly at Mr. Bingley, "I admit I am partial to my little Lizzy. There is something about her eyes that pierces and captivates. I cannot say no to them. It is a good thing she is sweet and sensible, and does not ask for much."

"Is she your eldest daughter, sir?" asked Mr. Bingley. His intrigue was on full display, and Mr. Bennet was pleased.

"She is my second eldest. Jane is about your age, and Lizzy is twenty."

"I agree with you, Bennet. Miss Elizabeth has the most remarkable eyes," said a neighbour. "She and her elder sister put the beauties in London to shame."

Sir William Lucas, one of the principal men of the county, exclaimed, "Miss Elizabeth is all that is lovely! My children often share stories of their recent adventures with Miss Eliza, and when only a day or two goes by without her visiting, they lament about missing her presence. You are very lucky, Bennet; Elizabeth Bennet is the jewel of Hertfordshire! Handsome, kind, lively, graceful, intelligent – the neighbourhood will miss her dearly, when she marries away from here."

It was good that Lady Lucas was not present, else she berate her husband for promoting a daughter not their own. For his part, Sir William was merely being honest about his good neighbours. He, too, would have liked his eldest, Charlotte, to capture the interest of Mr.

Bingley. If he had known how his compliments towards Elizabeth Bennet had sparked Mr. Bingley's interest of the lady, perhaps he would have said less about her and more about his dear Charlotte.

"Is Miss Elizabeth engaged to be married?" inquired Mr. Bingley.

"Not that I am aware," answered Mr. Bennet, raising an eyebrow at Sir William.

"My apologies. I do not mean to imply her marrying outside the county a definite thing, but you must admit, a lady like Miss Eliza will not be in want of suitors wherever she goes, and she appears to have no inclination to stay in Hertfordshire."

"No inclination *yet*," said another neighbour, looking meaningfully at the highly eligible Mr. Bingley. "I do not think we can take Lucas's words exactly as he says. Lucas had hopes, you see, of his own son marrying Miss Elizabeth. It would be a disappointment to him to see a neighbour win her hand."

"There might have been hopes on our end at one point, but it was clear that Miss Eliza did not return his sentiments," admitted Sir William. "It is no matter now. My son was prudent enough not to propose to her, and he and Miss Eliza are still good friends. Of course, a part of me had always thought her destined for greater things."

"You are too hasty to expel my little Lizzy from our neighbourhood. I, for one, would be glad if her future husband is settled nearby," said Mr. Bennet. "I will certainly miss her reading to me every other night, and her lovely song, when she is married."

"Miss Elizabeth is truly gifted; she has the most beautiful voice in Hertfordshire," affirmed another.

Mr. Bennet nodded. He glanced at Mr. Bingley and said, "I do not think I could part with her for anyone but the worthiest of gentlemen."

Mr. Bingley looked as if he very much wanted to hear more about Miss Elizabeth Bennet, but soon another neighbor took the opportunity to praise his own daughter's accomplishments. Yet, at the end of the visit, he was eager to meet one lady above all others.

Chapter 2

Mr. Bingley was quick to return Mr. Bennet's visit. Since their last encounter, he had heard many more tales of the beautiful Bennet daughters, and was hoping to glimpse at them. He was especially excited to meet the second eldest, and was disappointed when he was admitted into the library at Longbourn before he was able to see any of the ladies.

It was soon discovered that Mr. Bingley and Mr. Bennet did not have much in common, be it their personalities or their interests. Nevertheless, they liked each other. Mr. Bingley found the older man a witty, humourous sort of fellow, if a bit sarcastic, and Mr. Bennet found the younger man a lively, amiable sort, if a bit unscholarly. It did not take long for Mr. Bennet to wholeheartedly approve of Mr. Bingley for one of his daughters. He did briefly consider Jane for him, as she was his eldest, but he concluded that they were an imprudent match. Jane and Mr. Bingley were too similar of a disposition. They were too soft and nice that if they were to marry, their servants would take advantage of them and they would exceed their income. Jane was beautiful, and Mr. Bennet did not doubt that he would not have to worry for her future. Thus, he was brought back to his original target. Elizabeth was kind-hearted, but also smart and confident. She would increase Mr. Bingley's fortune, rather than live indulgently. Above all, it would be convenient if Elizabeth were to be mistress of an estate only three miles from Longbourn. Yes, Mr. Bennet thought, Mr. Bingley and his favourite daughter would suit each other well.

Determined to further his goal, Mr. Bennet decidedly walked towards a wide window overseeing the gardens. He was pleased that his daughter had listened to him when he had said, near the time of Bingley's appointed arrival, how nice it would have been to have some blooms liven up his study.

"I am grateful that my library boasts such a beautiful view. Over there, I can see my little Lizzy tending the flowers," said Mr. Bennet. To his delight, Mr. Bingley nearly ran to the window and became entranced by what he saw.

Only Elizabeth's back was seen, but she had a light and pretty figure, enhanced by the direction of the sun and the loveliness of the surrounding nature. Mr. Bingley stared in awe.

"I believe that is a new hat Lizzy recently trimmed," commented

Mr. Bennet.

Mr. Bingley startled out of his daze, stammering as he replied, "Y – yes. Indeed? It is a lovely hat. I like it very much."

"She will be glad to hear it."

The two men continued to gaze out the window as Elizabeth charmingly picked flower after flower, carefully placing them into her small basket.

"I will let you in on a secret," said Mr. Bennet. Bingley glanced at him curiously, but his eyes were quick to return to Elizabeth's figure.

"I will take your secret to my grave; you have my word," replied Bingley.

Mr. Bennet laughed. "It is not so serious of a secret. You see, if I open this window only slightly, I will hear everything from the garden. It is useful in a household full of women who like to keep confidences, but there is another, better advantage. If we are lucky, my little Lizzy will be singing, and we may be audience to her music."

He moved the window slowly, as to not make a sound, leaving a tiny gap open. To the men's pleasure, Elizabeth was indeed singing a tune, and although she sang softly to herself, her voice carried into the library. Then, all too soon, Elizabeth was done with her task, and she made her way back inside the house. The mesmerized Mr. Bingley was starting not to like her hat as much as before, as it did a fair job of covering her face.

"I have never heard such an angelic voice!" cried Mr. Bingley while Mr. Bennet closed the window.

"Yes, I am blessed to hear it whenever she chooses to grace us with it," said Mr. Bennet.

"She does not sing often?"

"I think she would like to, but her sister, Mary, enjoys playing and singing as well. Lizzy often leaves the piano for her enjoyment."

Mr. Bingley marveled at the sisterly affection. Then, realizing there was a chance to catch the sight of Elizabeth's face before she entered the house, he was quick to make his leave. Unfortunately, he was not fast enough to stumble upon her, but he was on the whole satisfied with the visit to Longbourn, and could not help but daydream of the pleasing figure and enchanting voice of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

His daydreams persisted as he took a trip to London and back to fetch his two sisters, brother-in-law, and best friend, and remained as he entered an assembly in Meryton, eager to finally see Miss Elizabeth's full appearance. So excited was Mr. Bingley that he cared not how miserable the rest of his party seemed to be in their introduction to Hertfordshire society, particularly his closest friend Mr. Darcy, who cared not for such an unrefined, rambunctious gathering. While the rest of his party was busy being unsociable, Mr.

Bingley allowed himself to be led by Sir William Lucas around the room.

His first dance was with Sir William's eldest daughter, Miss Charlotte Lucas. Miss Lucas was an older, more serious person than Mr. Bingley, and although he thought her pleasant, he could not help but wonder with a little impatience when he would meet the second Miss Bennet. During their dance, he inquired Miss Lucas if she knew her.

"Oh, yes, Eliza is my dearest friend," said Miss Lucas to Bingley's glee. "I can introduce you to her, if you would like."

Mr. Bingley replied that he would love to be introduced. Miss Lucas, having always known that she was far plainer and less charming than any of the Bennet sisters, was disappointed, but understanding, of Mr. Bingley's lack of interest in her. Among all the Bennets, Elizabeth *was* her favorite, and at times she liked to live vicariously through her. Therefore, she had no qualms promoting her friend to such a potential suitor. It would be a good thing, she thought, if Eliza were to marry so rich and so nearby. In her practical opinion, Bingley's good nature and handsome looks were only bonuses to his eligibility.

By the end of the dance, Mr. Bingley was even more anxious to meet the elusive, highly praised Miss Elizabeth. He allowed himself to be led by Miss Lucas to a group of vibrant, smiling ladies. The first lady was introduced to him as the eldest Bennet daughter, Miss Jane Bennet. Mr. Bingley was struck by her beauty, which was everything angelic. If Mr. Bingley had neither heard the praises of Miss Elizabeth nor seen her pleasing figure nor heard her marvelous voice, he may have taken interest in the lady before him. Alas, he *had* heard the praises, *had* seen her figure, and *had* heard her voice. Bingley already thought himself half in love, and once he was decided on something, he was dedicated to the decision – at least, in the moment. Therefore, while he thought he had never seen such a handsome lady as Miss Jane Bennet, he thought nothing more of her. Instead, he wondered how Miss Elizabeth Bennet would compare. He did not have to wonder long, as next to Miss Bennet was her first younger sister.

Immediately, he was drawn in by her eyes. Large, dark brown eyes stared curiously at him. He could not look away. So beautiful were those eyes, so brilliant were their depths, that he was lost. For hours he could have stared, and he might have done so, if not for Miss Lucas's pointed cough. He blushed, and was delighted to see that Miss Elizabeth was blushing too. The other gentlemen were right; Miss Elizabeth Bennet *did* have the most remarkable, mesmerizing eyes. It was hard to look away from them, but once he did, Mr. Bingley was pleased at what he discovered. For, the second Miss Bennet had the cutest small nose and the most radiant smile which showed her pretty

teeth – he had never thought teeth could be so pretty. She had pretty, full lips that graced her pretty, small face framed by pretty, brown curls. Her figure, which he had admired before, was greatly admired again. Miss Elizabeth, small, dark-haired and dark-eyed as she was, may have looked different than her elder sister, but she was certainly no less handsome. Miss Jane Bennet may have had the features commonly found in Mr. Bingley's extensive history of admired ladies, but Miss Elizabeth Bennet revised his preferences. Realising he should not stare so much at a lady, he asked Miss Elizabeth for the next dance. He felt a burst of happiness in his heart when Miss Elizabeth accepted his request with a charming smile, and another when he touched her hand as he escorted her to dance.

Mr. Bingley had never enjoyed dancing so much as he did with Miss Elizabeth, which in itself said a lot, as he was one to find great enjoyment in the art. She danced with great liveliness and elegance, and did not tire at all. Her conversation was playful and witty, and her replies to his own questions frequently threw him in a fit of laughter. There were moments where she made particularly clever remarks, which took him a few bars to understand, but once he did, he never found himself so amused. Oddly enough, in those instances she reminded him of his friend Darcy. Miss Elizabeth was intelligent, kind, fun, and beautiful, and Mr. Bingley had never been so impressed by a lady.

The gentleman's contentment in dancing with the jewel of the county went fully observed by the assembly attendees, including those of his own party.

Mr. Darcy was in complete disapproval. He hoped Bingley was not falling in love with another already; he had just moved into the neighbourhood, and it was not possible that he could become attached to anyone in so little time. Yet, there he was, dancing and laughing again, for a second time, with the small brunette. Mr. Darcy narrowed his eyes, trying to determine if it was in fact the same lady Bingley had danced his second with. He came to the conclusion that it was, which was a curious thing. Bingley was usually enamored with tall, fashionable, fair-haired ladies. The girl he observed was not any of that, which begged the question: why was Bingley making a besotted fool of himself? Darcy stared closely at the lady in attempt to find an answer. He allowed that she was tolerably pretty, but as Darcy was familiar with Bingley's preferences, he could not imagine her appearance being the thing to capture Bingley's attention. The good friend that he was, Darcy decided to examine his friend's interest with a more discerning eye, for it would not do if Bingley was taken in by some artful performance.

His discoveries were mortifying. They were completely

unprecedented, and equally frightening for himself as it would be for his friend. The lady was extraordinarily beautiful, to the extent that it affected him. He did not know how he came to such a conclusion; not five minutes ago he had scarcely allowed her to be pretty, and now he was admiring her. Darcy never admired. He acknowledged beauty when it was present, but he never admired. Quickly, he looked again to criticise, per his original intentions, and attempted to scrutinize the lady for all of her faults. This only caused his mortification to grow. Her face was lovely. Her dark eyes, especially, were his favourite, and he scolded himself for even having a favourite feature of hers. He tried to find a blemish on her face to counter his opinion of her eyes, and was irritated when he could find none. He was forced to observe her more. He did detect some faults, eventually, but it was only in regard to a lack of perfect symmetry in her form. That itself was a weak argument against her, for it took quite a while to find these flaws, and he knew not if there even existed a perfectly symmetric being. Truly, he thought that her figure was light and pleasing, and while watching her dance, he was entranced by her movements.

To his disgust, his friend Bingley suddenly went over to him, trying to get him to join the supposed fun.

“*You* are dancing with the only handsome lady in the room,” Darcy said, staring at the pretty brunette. He had, as a rule, always complimented his friend’s favourites, else he had to deal with Bingley going on particularly long tirades on why his angel was the best lady in the entire country. In the current case, however, Darcy’s praise was genuine.

“She is – words cannot describe her.” Bingley sighed, looking dreamily at Elizabeth. “She is so beautiful and clever and her voice – she is an angel!”

Darcy frowned, and made no comment.

Snapping out of his reverie, Bingley recalled that he was on a mission. “Oh, but you must dance – her elder sister is over there with Caroline. She is very handsome as well, and Miss Elizabeth says she is the kindest person in all of England! Shall I introduce you?”

Darcy glanced at the lady in question, and scoffed. “She may be tolerable enough for *you*, Bingley, but completely intolerable for me. Go back to your charming partner with her fine eyes and pretty laughter, instead of trying to shove her slighted sister upon me.”

“Darcy – “

“You are wasting your time with me, Bingley.”

Bingley knew when his friend was in a stubborn mood, so he took his advice and went back to Miss Elizabeth. Her smile was all it took to make him forget about Darcy’s rudeness and enjoy the rest of the evening, although he did make sure to ask the eldest Miss Bennet to

dance. He enjoyed that set as well, for Miss Bennet had many great things to say about her favourite sister. The praises shared to him about Miss Elizabeth matched his growing affection.

Jane Bennet, for her part, had heard Mr. Darcy's slight. Miss Bingley, who had also heard, but with more pleasure, explained to her how Mr. Darcy never liked to speak, let alone dance, with those not of his close acquaintance. Jane was admittedly hurt, but only for a moment, as she was never one to think ill of others. She was comforted by Miss Bingley's explanation, and focused on Mr. Darcy's more positive words about how lovely Elizabeth was.

After her dance with Mr. Bingley, whom she thought the most amiable, dashing gentleman she ever had the good fortune of meeting, she had completely forgotten his friend's impolite words. So enjoyable was her set with Mr. Bingley that, if not for his clear preference for Elizabeth, Jane might have considered herself half in love with the man, and truthfully, she was quite smitten. Mr. Bingley was everything good – sensible, good-humoured, and lively, not to mention handsome and full of easy, happy manners. She said as much to her sister when they were alone in her room after the ball.

"Yes, he seems to be a good man," agreed Elizabeth, but Jane expected to hear more.

"He danced with you twice, Lizzy!"

Elizabeth smiled and replied, "I did not expect it, and was especially flattered when he asked the second time, but are you sure that he does not admire you? I watched your dance with him, and he was very attentive."

"That was because we were talking of you!"

Elizabeth blushed.

"Do you admire him, Lizzy?" asked Jane.

"He is certainly handsome, and he has good character," said Elizabeth.

Again, Jane waited for her to say more, and when she didn't, played the role of the caring elder sister. "You have never admired anyone before," she commented.

"No, I have not. It is easy to not have affection for anyone with only humourless poppycocks in the vicinity."

"Perhaps you admire Mr. Bingley, and you do not know it, since the feeling would be new to you."

"What is there to know? Should it not be an intuition? For I am sure, at this moment in time, I do not admire Mr. Bingley in the way you are suggesting."

"Well, whenever I have liked someone, I feel like I am constantly blushing, and there is a nervousness in my stomach, like butterflies," described Jane. She declined to say that she felt as much when

thinking of Mr. Bingley.

“It sounds very dreadful. Perhaps I do not want to admire Mr. Bingley at all. Next time we meet, I will spend the entire time praising your good qualities, and he may very well fall in love with you instead.”

“Oh Lizzy, but he is enamoured by *you!*”

“We have only danced twice! It means very little, and I would not be surprised if he soon realises that you are prettiest, kindest, most deserving lady in all of Hertfordshire. Yes, Mr. Bingley will fall madly in love with you. It is only natural.”

“You must not say such things. I think *you* are the prettiest, kindest, most deserving lady, dear Lizzy, and I am happy in believing that Mr. Bingley thinks the same. I do hope he catches your eye one day, for I see no fault in him,” said Jane.

Elizabeth laughed. “You never see a fault in anyone.”

“But Mr. Bingley, especially, has shown us no flaws.”

“I admit that there is nothing I find wanting in Mr. Bingley, for now at least. He *is* everything agreeable. It makes me wonder what his faults are. There must be at least one, and I fear it may be very grave, for it is impossible for one to be so good – except maybe you, Jane.”

“I am sure Mr. Bingley is truly as good as he appears to be.”

“I suppose there is a possibility that he has gathered all of the goodness of his party.”

“Lizzy!”

“You see! You do not admonish them; you can never acknowledge the poor sides of others. Their manners were opposite of his.”

“His sisters were delightful when I conversed with them. I did not speak to Mr. Hurst, but he seems kind as well,” said Jane. “I was surprised that Mr. Darcy did not ask you to dance. I overheard him complimenting your beauty.”

Elizabeth was shocked, and could not help but ask for a more detailed account.

Jane was happy to reply, “I believe he took note of your eyes and laugh.”

“Is that so,” wondered Elizabeth, slightly blushing. “It is a shame that he was so haughty the entire evening. He is quite handsome, even more so than Mr. Bingley.” The rare frown on her sister’s face caused Elizabeth to grin. “You do not think so, Jane?”

Jane smiled and said, “Mr. Darcy is of course handsome, but I think Mr. Bingley has a slight advantage.”

“Dear Jane! I disagree, though I will say that no matter how handsome Mr. Darcy is, he will receive no admiration from me with his miserable personality.”

“Then I do hope you come to admire Mr. Bingley, Lizzy. I overheard

him praising your beauty too. He complimented your voice and said that words could not describe you, that you were so beautiful and clever, and that you were an angel!”

“I am very flattered, if he indeed said that!”

“Oh, Lizzy, he did! Is he not the sweetest gentleman?”

“I suppose so, but I do not know what to make of all this. How can he display such affection, when he has only known me for two dances?”

“Dear sister,” comforted Jane, “you do not have to make sense of anything now. Love may be very confusing, but I am sure that after your next meeting with Mr. Bingley, everything will be much clearer.”

Chapter 3

The morning after the assembly, Elizabeth found herself promoted from her mother's least favourite child to one worthy of her utmost attention. Lydia, whom Elizabeth knocked down in the ranking of Mrs. Bennet's favourite daughters, was vexed at the change.

"I hope she *does* marry Mr. Bingley, so she would go away, and give us all extra pin money," spoke Lydia rather loudly at breakfast.

Lydia was not the worst of it, to Elizabeth's dismay. She was extremely embarrassed when Mrs. Bennet frequently alluded to Mr. Bingley's attentiveness to her, especially when the Lucases called to talk about the previous evening.

"I admit I *was* surprised, at first, that Mr. Bingley danced with my Lizzy twice. I would have thought that Jane's beauty or Lydia's liveliness would have drawn him to either of them," said Mrs. Bennet. "But as the evening progressed, and we all got to know him better, it is no strange thing that he and Lizzy get along well; they have very similar dispositions."

Elizabeth disagreed. "I would think Mr. Bingley is more like Jane than myself."

"I overheard him telling Mr. Robinson you were the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld," commented Miss Charlotte Lucas.

"That is when we must question his senses," stated Elizabeth, "for we all know that *Jane* is the most beautiful."

"Oh, but I overheard Mr. Darcy complimenting you as well, Lizzy, as I had told you last night. Mr. Bingley's praise is not alone, and is surely genuine," said Jane.

"Mr. Darcy!" cried Mrs. Bennet in astonishment.

"I wished he would have danced with you, Eliza," said Miss Lucas.

"Why, Lizzy does not need to dance with Mr. Darcy. *He* is nothing to Mr. Bingley," sniffed Mrs. Bennet after contemplating how probable it was that Mr. Darcy would one day offer for Elizabeth. Based on the behaviour she had seen from him at the assembly, as well as the disgruntled sentiments of him from her neighbours, she thought that a match between the haughty man and anyone, really, was impossible. Thus, she put all her efforts into thinking the worst of Mr. Darcy and the best of Mr. Bingley.

Miss Lucas stated, "He is worth at least twice as much as Mr. Bingley."

“Why, he danced with none outside his party, was overheard insulting the neighbourhood to his friends more than once, and Mrs. Long told me he ignored her for about half an hour!” exclaimed Mrs. Bennet. “I would not even grant a dance to Mr. Darcy, Lizzy, if I were you, for he is certainly nothing to Mr. Bingley.”

Elizabeth was glad to be spared from having to respond, as the young Lucas boy cried, “If I were as rich as Mr. Darcy, I should not care how awful I was. I would keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine every day.”

Such a declaration distracted Mrs. Bennet who, by being an arguably assiduous parent to five, was inclined to dissuade the young, growing boy from those particular bad habits, even if they were only imagined.

Meanwhile in Longbourn’s study, Mr. Bennet moved a chess piece from the ongoing game he had with himself. Before moving any other parts, however, he shifted his focus to the letters on his writing desk. He sighed thinking about his foolish cousin, Mr. Collins, who had managed to write so obnoxious a letter that Mr. Bennet could hardly laugh at the folly. It was a good thing that Elizabeth had Mr. Bingley, else his dear girl might have been a target in Mr. Collin’s quest for a bride. From what he had heard about the assembly from Mrs. Bennet last evening, and from his daughters at breakfast, and just recently from the ruckus in the other room, he gathered that Bingley was on the path he wanted him to be. Unfortunately, he did not know where Elizabeth stood. Perhaps *she* needed a nudge more so than the gentleman.

The second letter on his desk was one informing him of a dinner with all the newly arrived officers in Meryton. He was loath to go, but figured that Bingley would be present there. There was nothing to do but accept the invitation. For, in order to get Elizabeth to fall in love, he needed her to see his desired son-in-law at his best advantage – something he could only plan if he knew the man better. He only hoped that there were no officers in the militia who were too charming. If Elizabeth were to fall for one of them, it would be grave indeed. Mr. Bennet could not stand the thought of his favourite child moving about all over the country, to areas far away from Hertfordshire. He was quite decided on Mr. Bingley.

It was soon discovered, after the ladies of Longbourn waited on the ladies of Netherfield and the ladies of Netherfield waited on the ladies of Longbourn, that while Mr. Bingley certainly favoured Elizabeth, the same could not be said for his sisters. That was quite alright with Elizabeth, as she could not like them either, with their supercilious treatment of everybody. She saw that even Jane, whom the Bingley sisters deemed the only one in Hertfordshire good enough to befriend,

was treated with barely a genuine sort of kindness. Jane liked the sisters, but of course Jane liked everybody. Jane was also a firm believer in Mr. Bingley's admiration of Elizabeth, and tried to persuade her sister to give all of the Bingley clan a chance, be it for friendship or, in Mr. Bingley's case, something more. Elizabeth was unwilling to take her sister's advice. Although with more and more meetings it became increasingly evident that Mr. Bingley admired her, it also became clear to Elizabeth that she did not return the strength of his feelings. She certainly liked him as she liked all her other friends, and thought that his character, manners, looks, wealth, and connections were everything good, but she could not help but feel that something was lacking in him, or at least in her response to him. There was no fluttering sensation, as Jane had told her there would be, when she saw him. There were no shy blushes in his presence, and no lingering thoughts of him while he was away. If it were up to her, Elizabeth would not think any more of Mr. Bingley. Yet the gentleman himself was far more attentive to her than a mere friend ought to be, and her mother, sisters, friends, and even her father encouraged a match between the two of them.

"Give it some time, my little Lizzy," said Mr. Bennet on one occasion. "You cannot expect to fall in love so quickly. Why, you have only known the man for a few weeks! But what you have seen of him – it is good, is it not? I believe I heard you telling your sister the other day that he was handsome."

"My mother speaks of his handsomeness far more than I do, and I do not think she is in love with him," Elizabeth quipped back.

"Four thousand a year, Lizzy, and likely more!" cried Mrs. Bennet on another occasion. "Handsome, tall, amiable, wealthy – you must change your dress, Lizzy, for I will not have Mr. Bingley see you in *that*!"

"If he is so amiable, he will think nothing derogatory, whichever dress I choose to wear," countered Elizabeth.

"Oh, Lizzy, I am sure you will come to love Mr. Bingley," said Jane one night. "You cannot see how he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching. If only you would glimpse back at him and catch his gaze, then I am certain you would fall in love immediately! His eyes are a delicate blue, and his eyelashes are so long. You would find them as beautiful as his personality."

"I am becoming convinced that *you* have fallen, either on your head, or completely in love with him yourself!" cried Elizabeth, to Jane's protests.

"Do marry Mr. Bingley, Lizzy," said Kitty one time when she, Lydia, Mary, and Elizabeth were walking to Meryton. "He is handsome and kind. I think I should like him for a brother."

“If Jane ever decides to like him, then you will have more hope there,” replied Elizabeth.

“Think of all the pin money you would have!” cried Lydia. “But even if Mr. Bingley were a penniless redcoat, I think you should still marry him, Lizzy. You may have to elope with him if that were the case, for papa would surely refuse Mr. Bingley if he had no money, but that in itself sounds like a fun adventure, don’t you agree, Lizzy? Kitty?”

“Risking my own reputation and that of my family for a man I do not love does not sound fun at all,” answered Elizabeth.

“It is shameful to even think of Lizzy eloping with anyone,” said Mary. “Mr. Bingley is a gentleman. He would never disgrace Lizzy that way.”

“And I would never disgrace myself,” Elizabeth was peeved she had to add.

“Eliza, you must show more affection than you feel. Mr. Bingley likes you, but he may never do more than like you if you do not help him on,” urged Charlotte one day.

“I do not love him, Charlotte.”

“You might not love him now, but you enjoy his friendship, and that is certainly a better foundation to have than those in many of the marriages we hear of. Perhaps your feelings may even grow. If you lose him, you may very well regret it. Few men as good and rich as Mr. Bingley exist.”

“I will do no such thing,” stated Elizabeth. She was tired of everyone speaking over her feelings, for she was, at heart, romantic. “Why, I have been in his company less than ten times since we met at the assembly, which itself took place only a few weeks ago! That should not be enough time to fully comprehend him and his intentions. I will regard Mr. Bingley as if he were any other friend, for that is all I feel for him. If my feelings happen to change, and I doubt that they will, then I will allow them to influence my actions, but otherwise I am afraid no one will see false affections on my end.”

Chapter 4

Sir William Lucas was hosting a large party at Lucas Lodge, and both the Longbourn and Netherfield people were present. Elizabeth had not one, but two inhabitants of Netherfield follow her person around the entire evening. That Mr. Bingley would trail after her like a puppy was expected at that point, but Mr. Darcy's attitude could only be explained by his attachment to his friend and dislike of everyone else in the room.

Contrary to Elizabeth's line of thinking, Mr. Darcy attended to her conversations because he was increasingly interested in the lady herself, for himself. He wished to speak with her, but did not know how, and so he stayed silent, listening to her talk smoothly with seemingly everyone but him.

If Elizabeth were not so occupied by Mr. Bingley's attentions and her own conflicting thoughts of whether she should remain friendly with the man or try to push him away, she might have paid more thought to Mr. Darcy's mysterious stares. So frequently did he glance her way that she could not fail to notice, but she did not have the time to interpret it. While she could not exactly think, she could feel, and what she felt was an odd self-consciousness and an urge to blush. She could not imagine why that was the case, knowing little of the man as she did. The few qualities that she was aware of included how handsome, rich, and quiet he was, and though she still believed him a little haughty as she had during the assembly, more than anything she thought him strange. A part of her wished for less distractions, so she could properly sketch the character that all of Hertfordshire seemed to dislike.

Elizabeth's other attendant, Mr. Bingley, at one point realized that his friend was present and more silent than usual. He did not notice how often Darcy's gaze settled on Elizabeth, and therefore endeavoured to include him in his conversation with the lady. However, it was not to be, as Miss Lucas called her away.

"I am going to open the instrument, Eliza, and you know what follows," teased Miss Lucas.

Elizabeth protested, but Charlotte was persistent. Soon, the room was filled with Elizabeth's song. Her performance was by no means capital, but it was nothing less than pleasing, and for the lovestruck, it was quite worthy of being the most beautiful of sounds to ever grace

their ears. The two gentlemen who had attended her all evening were entranced.

“She is an angel!” said Mr. Bingley to his friend.

Mr. Darcy made no comment, but he secretly agreed; he had never been so affected by a performance, and he was used to the playing of his exceptionally proficient sister.

Everyone, save for Elizabeth herself, was disappointed when Mary took over the instrument. The contrast in the sisters’ playing and reception was great; Mary was the more advanced player, but the seriousness she applied to her piece did not match the mood of anyone present, and was thereby less pleasing to listen to than the preceding performance. Still, Mary proved useful when, at the request of her younger sisters, she began to play some lively airs.

The younger Bennets and some officers began to dance. While Mr. Darcy judged the activity with silent indignation, Mr. Bingley was the opposite, and went to join the group. Unknowingly, Mr. Darcy, too absorbed in his own thoughts, began to ignore the host of the evening, who had taken Mr. Bingley’s place beside him. Sir William was not one to be deterred by rudeness, and attempted again to make conversation. Finally noticing, Mr. Darcy replied with little civility. Indeed, he did not seem at all interested in what Sir William had to say until the older man entreated him to dance with Elizabeth, who had been moving their way.

“You cannot refuse to dance, I am sure, when so much beauty is before you,” said Sir William.

Suddenly, Mr. Darcy was not unwilling to dance, especially when Sir William took Elizabeth’s hand and placed it in his. He marveled at the smallness of it, and wondered how it felt without the barrier of their gloves. All too soon, Elizabeth pulled away, saying with some discomposure how she had not the least intention of dancing.

“Mr. Darcy is all politeness,” she asserted when Sir William entreated further. Her cheeks were a pretty shade of pink, and when she smiled at him as she walked away, Mr. Darcy felt a small, curious hope bloom in his chest.

He watched her go and mused at her resistance. A part of him was disappointed, but he was not offended; if anything, her actions endeared herself to him more. He was certain she took into considering his dislike of dancing, and wondered if she noticed any of his other preferences. Even when he was confronted by Miss Bingley, he was thinking of Elizabeth with complacency, to the extent that he complimented Elizabeth’s prettiness and fine eyes aloud.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst needed to make at least *one* friend in

the neighbourhood they deemed beneath themselves, so they chose to invite the eldest Miss Bennet, and only the eldest Miss Bennet, over for tea one afternoon. This vexed Mrs. Bennet, who thought they should have extended the invitation to her second daughter. Her feelings were soothed a bit when the note stated that the gentlemen were to dine with the officers, but she was not one to give up on getting one of her daughters married. Mrs. Bennet had a plan, and the next day, when Elizabeth declared that she would go to Netherfield to attend Jane, who had fallen ill from riding in the rain, she was almost satisfied.

“You will take the carriage,” said she to her second eldest.

Mr. Bennet stated, “I am afraid it is under repair.”

“Under repair? It cannot be so!”

“Indeed, that is the case. Shall I ready a horse for you, Lizzy?”

“The carriage cannot be under repair! Lizzy cannot ride, for she will injure herself before she reaches Netherfield.”

“I will walk,” said Elizabeth.

“You most certainly will not! What would Mr. Bingley and his sisters think of you?”

“Your mother is right, Lizzy. It will be better if you ride,” insisted Mr. Bennet.

“I am no horsewoman – “

“Indeed she is not! Did you not hear what I said, Mr. Bennet? Lizzy is not Jane, she cannot ride so far on her own! She will fall and break an arm, or a leg, and who will be there to help her?”

“Who indeed?” asked Mr. Bennet. He had a glint in his eye that Elizabeth did not like. Mrs. Bennet also saw it, and after a moment both understood his meaning, although their feelings were quite opposite of each other’s.

“Why, my dear Mr. Bennet, you are right!” cried the matron. “Lizzy, you *will* take the horse.”

“Truly, I would prefer to ride.”

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “I cannot comprehend your worry, Lizzy. You had ridden with Jane once in the beginning of summer, and you did not fall then, did you? I am sure you will be fine.”

With both parents against her, and threats to forbid her from seeing Jane at all, Elizabeth had no choice but to allow herself to be put on a horse and on the trail to Netherfield. Her plan was, once Longbourn was out of sight, to jump off the horse and walk it the rest of the way. However, Mr. Bennet appeared to have predicted her thoughts, and had placed her on the largest mount they owned. A considerable height from the ground, Elizabeth did not dare to try and get off by herself. She was normally not so easily intimidated, but horses were the exception. Thankfully, the horse, despite its gigantic size, was

gentle enough that it took her directions well. Although Elizabeth could only set a slow pace without falling, it was a speed faster than walking and she was glad to be able to move at all. Her concentration also distracted her from the great worry she had for her sister.

When she finally reached Netherfield, she breathed with much relief. She was a bit embarrassed when she had to ask for help dismounting from the attendant who greeted her, for she was certain she looked a clueless mess on the horse. To her surprise, Mr. Darcy appeared out of nowhere, directing the servant to take care of the horse instead while he helped her down. His touch was warm, and Elizabeth felt her face flush more than it had from the exercise. Her gloves were on the thinner side, and he donned none at all.

"Thank you," she said, after Mr. Darcy got her safely on the ground. His staring discomfited her. She knew she was a bit tousled from the ride, and was aware that she came without an escort, but she would not let her appearance get the better of herself, not when Jane needed her. She straightened her back and stared back at Mr. Darcy.

"I was returning from my ride when I saw you," said he. "Your steed is as sizable as my own. You did not look comfortable on him. Surely he is not your usual mount?"

His tone was disapproving, and Elizabeth was miffed that he so bluntly pointed out her faults. She replied, "I do not normally ride, but my sister sent a note. Is she very ill? I should like to see her."

Mr. Darcy did not know how her sister fared, so he escorted her into the breakfast-parlour, where all but Jane were recently assembled. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were most shocked at Elizabeth's appearance, but nonetheless polite, and answered all her enquiries about Jane. Mr. Bingley had been smiling at Elizabeth since she stepped into the room, which she thought somewhat odd, as most of the conversation pertained to how very feverish Jane was. Still, his kindness was genuine, and she appreciated how welcoming he was, compared to the insincerity of his sisters, the silence of his brother-in-law, and the odd staring by his friend.

Upon seeing Jane, Elizabeth was distressed to find her so ill. Miss Bingley's reluctant invitation for her to stay until Jane was better was accepted with thanks, and soon a supply of clothes was brought from Longbourn.

When Elizabeth opened her trunk, she was displeased to find that it was full of dresses from several years ago. Although the length was fine, the fabric clung tightly to her figure. Most irritating of all, however, was the note her mother had left for her.

My dear Lizzy, it read, if only you had listened to my advice when ordering your recent gowns. They do nothing to recommend you to single gentlemen. Now I must deal with the ladies of Netherfield seeing you in

such outdated fashion! But I must make do, and men like Mr. Bingley do not care for fashion as they do a lady's figure.

Mrs. Bennet might have been an indecorous, outlandish person, but there was no denying her successful endeavours, no matter the methods she employed to get her way. The next morning, Elizabeth's dress caught the eye of Mr. Bingley, who began to stare at her as his friend habitually did. Indeed, Mr. Darcy continued his brazen staring, though his eyes took on a darker note than normal as they lingered on Elizabeth's figure. Elizabeth had to try very hard not to blush, as Mr. Bingley's appreciative looks finally gave her more understanding of Mr. Darcy's gazes. It was remarkable to her how one gentleman's glances could provoke nothing in her, while the other made her feel – why, surely it was not the fluttering Jane had told her about! But it very possibly could have been, and Elizabeth thought that it was not a good thing at all; to feel something for Mr. Darcy would be very dangerous for her heart. High standing gentlemen as proud as he did not offer for dowerless country girls with no connections.

She did not have time to be too annoyed at her feelings, however, for her mother arrived at Netherfield with Kitty and Lydia in tow, and embarrassment soon overtook any other emotion.

“Lizzy, my sweet girl! How are you?” Mrs. Bennet fluttered towards her.

“I am well, mama, but Jane is quite ill,” replied Elizabeth.

Mrs. Bennet went to see her eldest, and although she did find her sick, Jane was nowhere near the brink of death. Satisfied, Mrs. Bennet felt free to focus on her main objective of coming to Netherfield by letting Mr. Bingley know all about her dear Lizzy's virtues. For she thought that if she had left the task all to Elizabeth herself, her daughter would never receive a proposal, and the Bennet ladies would be left to the hedgerows once Mr. Bennet died.

“My dear Lizzy is so sweet to look after her sister,” said Mrs. Bennet to all in the Netherfield parlour. “She is always looking after people, and not only my girls. Whenever her friend Miss Lucas is ill, she always requests to see my Lizzy, and I always allow it. For, if Miss Lucas were to succumb to illness and wants my Lizzy to be there before she takes last her breath, who am I to forbid such a sentimental event? All the Lucases are often yearning after my Lizzy's company. The jewel of the neighbourhood, our friends like to call her! I have to say I quite agree with such a title.”

Elizabeth listened with great mortification. Her focus was drawn to Kitty and Lydia, who were stifling their giggles at their mother's rare praise of her. It was a mistake to glance at them, for after catching Elizabeth's eyes, the younger girls conspired with their mother.

“Did you hear that the militia are in Meryton?” Kitty asked the

Netherfield party.

Mr. Bingley said that they had heard.

"Kitty and I are excited to see them, but Lizzy has declared that she was not. Why, we were so shocked to hear that from her! Who would not be eager to see the dashing redcoats! But, perhaps, it is not so surprising," said Lydia, looking meaningfully at Mr. Bingley as Kitty glanced back and forth between him and Elizabeth.

Mr. Bingley brightened at the implication. Mrs. Bennet was pleased at her youngest daughters for their methods and the gentleman's reaction. Mr. Darcy, who was busy staring at Elizabeth, did not notice any insinuation between her and his friend. Elizabeth felt a strong need to vigorously nurse Jane back to Longbourn.

As the conversation went on, Elizabeth had much more to be embarrassed about on the behalf of her relations. Her family's behaviour might have been too much for the likes of Miss Bingley, and at certain times Elizabeth herself, but Mr. Bingley's amiability soothed any major tension. Elizabeth was very appreciative of that, and in addition to her natural liveliness, she may have been more charming than she ought to have been.

"That is exactly what I should have supposed of you," said Elizabeth to Mr. Bingley, after he had explained some part of his spontaneous character.

"You begin to comprehend me, do you?" cried he, turning towards her. His wide smile was much approved by Mrs. Bennet.

Elizabeth nodded. "Oh, yes! I understand you perfectly."

"I wish I might take this for a compliment; but to be so easily seen through, I am afraid, is pitiful."

"You are certainly not!" cried Mrs. Bennet. "My dear Lizzy only enjoys observing anything and anyone she takes great interest in."

"I did not know before," continued Bingley to Elizabeth, "that you were a studier of character. It must be an amusing study! I should like to take up the hobby myself."

"Yes; but intricate characters are the *most* amusing. They have at least that advantage."

"The country," said Darcy, wanting to take part of a conversation Elizabeth was in, "can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society."

Elizabeth countered, "But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them forever."

Mr. Darcy's remark had offended Mrs. Bennet, who went on to defend the country and suggest its advantages to town. So miffed was she at Mr. Darcy that she stated, in reference to him, "That gentleman seemed to think the country was nothing at all."

"Indeed, Mama, you are mistaken," said Elizabeth, blushing for her mother. "You quite mistook Mr. Darcy. He only meant that there were not such a variety of people to be met with in the country as in town, which you must acknowledge to be true."

Mr. Darcy took Elizabeth's attempt to sooth any damage made by her mother's rudeness as a great support of him. It was as if she were his wife, defending him as her husband. He quite liked the thought until he realised, with alarm, that his imaginations were running too wild.

Mrs. Bennet went on to act with little refinement, and at one point, a remark about Hertfordshire was so outlandish that nothing but concern for Elizabeth could enable Bingley to keep his countenance. Darcy felt the same concern for Elizabeth, except his countenance remained severe instead of friendly. Indeed, he would have stayed stony throughout the entirety of Mrs. Bennet's visit if it were not for his conversation with Elizabeth.

In response to his saying that poetry was the food of love, Elizabeth said, "Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away."

Darcy could not help but smile at her; such an answer endeared Elizabeth to him greatly. As he looked into her eyes, he noticed her affected response to him. His heart sped a long time after she turned away from him, a blush trailing down her neck and disappearing behind her pretty dress.

By the end of Mrs. Bennet's visit, a ball at Netherfield had been promised from Bingley by the persuasion of Kitty and Lydia. Furthermore, Kitty had fulfilled a task given to her by Mr. Bennet. She had given a confused Elizabeth a bonnet from Longbourn that had not been packed in her trunk from yesterday.

Although he did not say so aloud, Mr. Bingley recognised the hat – it was the one he had seen Elizabeth in, on his first call to Longbourn. Being a sentimental fellow, he was quite fond of the bonnet, and was eager to see it again on its lovely owner.

When Elizabeth returned to her sick sister's side, both Bingley and Darcy had the notion that Elizabeth carried a semblance of affection for their own person, but not the other's.

Chapter 5

Elizabeth's stay at Netherfield cemented Mrs. Hurst's, and especially Miss Bingley's dislike of her. The two women were well aware how often their brother inquired after Miss Elizabeth when she was not in the room, and when she did appear, they noticed how affected Mr. Darcy was. Neither Mrs. Elizabeth Bingley nor Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy sounded tolerable to them, and the longer Elizabeth stayed, the more worried they became. Any attempts to ridicule the second Miss Bennet only resulted in the two men vocalising compliment after compliment of said lady. If Mrs. Hurst questioned Miss Eliza's method of coming to Netherfield, Mr. Bingley would rave about what a compassionate sister she was. If Miss Bingley mocked Miss Eliza's untidy, wild appearance, Mr. Darcy would praise her brightened eyes and complexion. It was all very vexing to the Bingley sisters, and on their side they could only count on Mr. Hurst, who found Miss Eliza's disinterest in cards and ragout completely ridiculous.

Miss Bingley was especially worried about Mr. Darcy's admiration. In the whole of their acquaintance, Mr. Darcy had never shown the slightest bit of interest in any lady, and there he was, praising Eliza's fine eyes at every opportunity. There was at least a little solace to be found in Mr. Darcy's loyalty to her brother, and the status of Eliza's wealth and connections; surely he would not pursue someone Charles admired, and surely he would not pursue someone of so greatly inferior society. Nonetheless, she did not like that Eliza was the object of either man's affections.

Miss Bingley was correct to be worried, for Mr. Darcy concluded that he was in great danger. His brain ceased to operate every time Elizabeth was in the room. He was entirely drawn into how sharp Elizabeth's tongue was and how spirited her eyes were when they debated, and in his muddled state he failed to notice how his friend's initial interest in the lady was turning into something more fervent.

Mr. Bingley's attachment to Elizabeth likewise only grew during her stay. He was disappointed with how little he saw of her, as she rarely left her sister's side, but even then, her devotion made her more estimable to him than ever. In their few interactions, he endeavoured to be as attentive a gentleman as possible. He asked after her sister, inquired over her own well-being, and not only retrieved for her every book in his possession, but promised to buy more for both of their

benefit. On the second day of Elizabeth's stay, Bingley dragged Darcy to the local bookseller and returned with a mountain of books enough to make the Netherfield library only second in Hertfordshire to Mr. Bennet's. Mr. Darcy, for his part, would not have been so eager to help his friend rebuild his library if he had known that Bingley's foremost motivation was to impress Elizabeth. Instead, all three men were satisfied with the undertaking; Mr. Darcy because he thought his friend was finally interested in expanding his mind, Mr. Bingley because he thought he would rise in Elizabeth's esteem, and the bookseller because his pockets were substantially heavier from the sales.

"Did you see Miss Elizabeth's horse in the stables?" Mr. Bingley asked Mr. Darcy on the way to Netherfield from the bookshop. He had a dreamy look on his face. "It was absolutely massive! She must be quite the horsewoman."

"She is not," said Mr. Darcy. "I saw her riding the morning she came, and was fearful that she would fall."

Mr. Bingley was astonished. "Was she so bad?"

"Yes."

"I cannot believe it! She is so lively and attuned to the outdoors; one would think that she is a horsewoman. Perhaps that is not her usual steed? Her sister's is much smaller."

"It does look like a workhorse, but she said that she does not normally ride."

"I would have liked to see her riding," said Mr. Bingley. Then, after a silence, he wondered aloud, "Perhaps she is in need of riding lessons?"

"Direly," replied his friend. Mr. Darcy thought about Mr. Bennet's neglect, and how nice it would be for him to steal Elizabeth away from the man. The things he would be able to provide the lovely lady! He was sorely tempted to give her a suitable mare and teach her how to ride at Pemberley. He stiffened. His thoughts were too dangerous.

Similarly to his friend, Mr. Bingley was daydreaming about giving Elizabeth riding lessons. How would such a thing be possible? If he courted the lady, perhaps her father would allow it. Was it too soon? He had never formally courted a lady before, despite frequently falling in love. In retrospect, with each of those ladies, it wasn't quite *love*, but more so a youthful infatuation, he had been in, and he was lucky that he had Darcy guide him away from all of those instances. He could not imagine having arrived in Hertfordshire married, only to become enamoured with Elizabeth.

"Darcy, you are a good friend," he declared.

Darcy thanked him, his pride evident. Bingley did not mind the proudness; in fact, he admired his friend's dignity and confidence. He

thought about asking Darcy for his opinion concerning his feelings for Elizabeth, but decided against it for the time being, figuring that he would only get told that he was too hasty in his sentiments. Once more time had passed, however, he would share all, and hopefully Darcy would, for the first time, be approving of the lady he loved.

In her sister's sickroom, Elizabeth might have been excessive in her worry, but Jane appreciated it, as she appreciated everything, and felt very loved indeed. Although Jane was sick, she was able to talk, and the topic she liked most was Mr. Bingley.

"He is so attentive, Lizzy. He must admire you a great deal," said Jane for the fourth time.

"He is merely behaving as a gentleman ought."

"Yes, but there is a genuineness in how welcoming he is."

"You may be correct, but that speaks more to his overall character than to his supposed affections."

"Surely you like him, Lizzy?" Jane looked so wishful that Elizabeth almost wanted to say that she did, just to make her sister happy. Instead, she sighed.

"There is nothing *not* to like. Well, save for his sisters."

"Lizzy!"

"They are most highhanded," said she. "The future wife of Mr. Bingley will suffer terribly by their company. And then there are his friends. His acquaintance with Mr. Hurst may be excused, for they are brothers by marriage, but Mr. Darcy is such a peculiar, arrogant creature. I do not know what to make of him."

Jane frowned. "Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst are very pleasant, especially on further acquaintance."

"Jane, you forget that when I quit this room, I am in their company. Your opinion does not match my own, I am afraid."

"I thought you liked Mr. Darcy," continued Jane. Kind and optimistic as she was, she had already forgotten Mr. Darcy's insult towards her, and endeavoured to cast him in good light, if only to shine, by association, greater light on Mr. Bingley. "Were you not very flattered when he spoke of your beauty at the assembly?"

"I would have been more flattered if he had asked me to dance," said Elizabeth. "Jane, I am afraid to tell you that Mr. Darcy lives up to his reputation among our neighbours. The way he criticised my horse-riding abilities –"

"You rarely ride, my dear."

"That does not make his insults any less offensive!" Elizabeth laughed. "Yet for all his arrogance, you are correct that I do not dislike him. I merely do not know what to think of him. We had the

most ridiculous conversation about the accomplishments of women. His opinions were absolutely absurd, and I wonder at him ever finding a bride that will fit his requirements of a lady. By the time she masters all of the arts and music and languages, and reads all of the books in the grand library of his that he boasts of, she will be at least ninety years of age, and certainly unsuitable for marriage.”

“Did Mr. Bingley have an opinion?” asked Jane, wanting to steer the conversation back to her favorite topic.

“He wanted to keep peace.”

“Is that not lovely?”

“He is much like you in that regard,” said Elizabeth. “You and Mr. Bingley would be most compatible.”

“Oh, no,” protested Jane. “Mr. Bingley is so lively, which I am not, but also so refined. He is much like *you* that way, and you are without a doubt his favourite. Do not try to match him with me, Lizzy, when you are the one he likes.”

“*Jane*,” warned Elizabeth.

Jane placed her hand over Elizabeth’s. “Dear Lizzy, I do not want to say anything that will make you uncomfortable.”

“I do esteem Mr. Bingley, but all of this talk has made me a little wary on how to behave with him. It would be a shame to lose his friendship, but I do not want to encourage him.”

“I do not wish for you to become uneasy in his presence, for as you said, the loss of his acquaintance would be most tragic. I will try not give you anymore cause for embarrassment.”

“You may not, but mama’s exclamations, in company no less, may make it awkward.”

“Dear mama! She means well, but I will try to talk to her for your sake,” assured Jane. “If you are worried that he will raise expectations, then – “

Elizabeth interjected, “It is the opposite. I do not want to raise *his* expectations. He is everything a gentleman ought to be, but somehow, my heart is not touched. I hope that his is not either, for I would love to have him as a friend, and men who are spurned often turn bitter.”

“I cannot see Mr. Bingley ever turning bitter,” defended Jane. “Remember, Lizzy, that it is in the gentleman’s power to propose. You cannot raise his expectations in the way he can raise yours, so I do not believe you should feel conscious of your behaviour with him. If you cannot think of Mr. Bingley as a suitor, then I implore you to, at the very least, treat him as you would any other friend. It would be a sad thing otherwise.”

Elizabeth thought that Jane’s advice was sound, and on her subsequent encounters with the Netherfield party, she felt free to continue being her normal self, at least where Mr. Bingley was

concerned. In regard to Mr. Darcy, however, she thought that she might have to be more circumspect of her actions. Despite what she told Jane, she feared that she liked him, and did not want anyone to know, especially the man himself. For, she thought that nothing would come out of her little infatuation, if it was an infatuation at all; she was not quite sure. Therefore, she endeavoured to refrain from showing any signs of affection towards him. She figured that it would be easy enough, considering how their debates often made her vexed at him.

Surely, she thought, no one would mistake any of her words or actions for flirting and the like.

Elizabeth could not have been more wrong.

On the last day of the Bennet sisters' stay at Netherfield, Mr. Bingley sought out Elizabeth with a grin. He was sure of her admiration of him, for she did not bestow such signs of affection in anyone else's direction. With his sisters, her smiles were polite, but not much more. With Mr. Hurst, her laughter was restrained. With Jane, she was most affectionate, but it was to be expected, given their marvelous sisterhood. With Mr. Darcy – well, she did not appear to like Darcy at all! Their arguments made him uncomfortable, for he liked harmony, but it was good to know that Elizabeth did not send her big smiles and angelic laughter in the direction of the only other single gentleman under Netherfield's roof.

He found her in the library, reading one of the new books he bought. She was comfortably situated in a large armchair by the fire, looking as if she belonged nowhere else. Absorbed in her reading, she did not hear him approach.

"Miss Bennet," he greeted, smiling. She obeyed his request to be seated. "Your sister is well, I hope?"

Elizabeth's countenance brightened. "Yes, she has recovered fully."

"I cannot be gladder to hear that, but if she needs additional time to rest, Netherfield will always be open to you both."

"You are kind, sir. As tempted as I am to accept your offer, we have seen for ourselves how improved Jane was last evening and at breakfast. Only twenty minutes ago, I left her, the perfect image of health, to take a turn in the garden with Miss Bingley. We must return to Longbourn, and I thank you and Miss Bingley for hosting us. Without your benevolence, Jane would not have recovered so soon."

"I believe your tender care has the most to do with her improvement. Your dedication to your sister is simply inspirational," praised Bingley. Noticing the weakening fire, he went to tend it. "You must be cold."

"You need not do that for my sake," said Elizabeth.

"What gentleman would I be not to?"

“Most gentlemen would call for a servant.”

Bingley blushed, suddenly aware of how silly he looked on his knees on the floor. “You are right, and must believe me very foolish in this position.”

“Yet you do not get up, and continue in your endeavour.” Elizabeth laughed. “I do not think you look foolish at all. If only more gentlemen were willing to face soot for a lady’s comfort. To ease *your* comfort, I promise that my eyes will be fixed on my book.”

Her commendation was like a seal of approval. He rarely felt worthy of anything, really, but at that moment, with him on one knee and Elizabeth sitting prettily before him, he was struck with a decided impulsivity.

“Miss Bennet, will you –”

“Bingley? What are you doing on the floor?”

Darcy had entered the room, an unimpressed eyebrow raised. Bingley hastily stood. Flustered by the interruption of his proposal, he made some half-hearted excuse and practically fled the room, leaving Darcy and Elizabeth to sit silently and steal glances at each other for the next half hour.

Chapter 6

The arrival of Mr. Collins, heir to the modest estate of Longbourn, instigated great chaos. Within days of being introduced to the man, it was decided that Jane, who was newly returned home after her bout of illness at Netherfield, would quickly be sent off again, this time to town to stay with their Uncle Gardiner and his family.

“But Jane will miss Mr. Bingley’s ball!” cried Kitty.

“There will be plenty of balls in the future, and Jane will have sufficient entertainment in town,” said Mrs. Bennet, currently writing the letter that would inform, rather than request, her brother to prepare a room in his London house.

“You better go, Jane, else you’d end up as Mrs. Collins,” advised a giggling Lydia. “La! What a pain it would be, to be married to such a man!”

Mary frowned. “Mrs. Collins would be the future mistress of Longbourn.”

“Mrs. Collins would also be attached to Mr. Collins for as long as he lives,” stated Elizabeth. She was sad that Jane had to leave so abruptly, but more than anything, she was relieved that her mother’s scheming finally had some sense to it. She had observed how Mr. Collins intended to make Jane his wife, and was fearful that her sweet sister would find herself accepting a proposal from him without meaning to. Beautiful, kind Jane deserved someone better than the silly man, and escaping to London ensured her safety from such a marriage.

“I will be sad to miss Mr. Bingley’s ball, but you will all write about it, will you not? And I will be happy to see my aunt and uncle, and my cousins again,” said Jane. She appeared, as always, unperturbed, but Elizabeth knew better; Jane certainly did not enjoy Mr. Collins’ advances. Few would, given his putrid smell and wit of a potato.

“You will be home soon enough, Jane. I reckon that Mr. Collins will be engaged by the end of the month, and you will return with my brother for Christmas,” Mrs. Bennet assured from her writing desk. Placing the finishing touches on her letter, she stood and glanced at her three youngest daughters, one by one. Her gaze finally settled on Mary. “Come, Mary. Jane will not be needing all of her gowns when she will be buying more in town, and I know of a few she does not wear anyhow that would suit you well.”

Mary, who was often forgotten by her mother, but desirous of her notice, was happily surprised by the acknowledgement.

“Mama! Why would *Mary* be the one to get first pick at Jane’s things?” whined Lydia.

Mary stuck up her nose and stated, “Elizabeth is too short and slight to fit Jane’s gowns. By seniority, it is only fitting that I take her things.”

“Perhaps everyone should ask *Jane* if she is willing to give up her dresses,” said Elizabeth.

“I have plenty of gowns I do not wear often,” spoke Jane. “Many would suit you, Mary. And Lydia, I think there is one that you would particularly like – the one with the pink lace.”

Thus, Jane was sent to London, and Mr. Collins swiftly bestowed his attentions to the next eldest daughter, Elizabeth. Mrs. Bennet would have none of that either, for in her mind, Elizabeth was destined to marry Mr. Bingley, and after becoming Mrs. Bingley, she would introduce Jane and Lydia to other rich gentlemen. That left either Mary or Kitty to become the next mistress of Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet thought Kitty had the better chance of receiving a proposal, but Mr. Bennet had informed her days ago that if she *had* to promote a daughter to Mr. Collins, to let it be Mary. It did not take much consideration for her to believe in her husband’s wisdom. For in the bright future, Kitty would have survived the marriage mart in town better; though she was not as accomplished as Mary, she was prettier and livelier.

“How clever your father is!” exclaimed Mrs. Bennet the next day, looking out the window. Her daughters and Mr. Collins were leaving the house for Meryton. The gentleman was walking particularly close to Mary. Earlier, she had made a point to take him aside for a conversation, in which she hinted at Elizabeth’s imminent engagement to a certain gentleman of four or five thousand a year. Mr. Collins was expectedly disappointed, for Elizabeth was handsome and charming, but it took little effort to make him shift his attentions, yet again, to the next daughter in line. “My dear Mary,” Mrs. Bennet had said, “is the most accomplished of my daughters. Why, did you not say that your patroness values great dedication to the arts? My Mary is of the same mind; for hours, she practises on her instrument. When she is not playing, she is reading sermons and the like. I believe she would be a great wife to a man of the church.”

In no time at all, Elizabeth was free from having Mr. Collins trying to woo her, as the man saw the merit in Mrs. Bennet’s words and subjected Mary to his ridiculous courtship.

Mary seemed almost happy to be the object of Mr. Collin’s attentions. Elizabeth thought her sister could aspire for more in a

man, but when she raised her concerns, Mary very highhandedly spied on the virtues of being Mr. Collin's bride and Longbourn's future mistress.

"La, Lizzy, let plain Mary marry Mr. Collins," said Lydia after Mary was droning on too long. "She is lucky to be receiving any notice from men at all, even if it is from the toad-like Mr. Collins."

Lydia was immediately chided, to no actual avail on her behaviour.

Later that night, Elizabeth entered Mary's room as they prepped for bed. For the nth time, she asked, "Are you certain you want to tie yourself to such a man? Absolutely certain?"

"Of course I am," replied Mary. "Why should I not be? He is papa's heir."

"I know that you know how ridiculous he is."

"You think too highly of yourself and your own cleverness, Lizzy. I do not think Mr. Collins is ridiculous at all."

"You cannot be serious."

"He is a perfectly fine suitor. Your friend Charlotte, for example, would be eager to have him as a husband."

"Charlotte!" cried Elizabeth. "She is too sensible for him, as are you."

"She is seven-and-twenty, and Mr. Collins not only has a living, but will inherit Longbourn. By those facts alone, he is highly coveted."

"But what of love, Mary? Do you not wish to marry for the deepest of affection?"

"Who said I am not?"

Elizabeth gaped at her sister. "You *like* Mr. Collins? Truly?"

"Not everyone is as vain as you are." Mary sniffed. "Not only men as handsome as your Mr. Bingley are capable of garnering affection from the fairer sex."

"While I do not doubt that Mr. Bingley has many admirers, I am not one of them," said Elizabeth. She cupped Mary's face and stared directly into her eyes. "You genuinely like Mr. Collins?"

Mary nodded against Elizabeth's hands, which made her cheeks and mouth puff up a bit like a fish. "I do."

"Are you certain?"

"I am."

"Absolutely certain?"

"Yes, Lizzy."

Discerning no dishonesty, Elizabeth sighed and released Mary. "Then I will try to be happy for you."

"Thank you, Lizzy."

Elizabeth was careful to observe Mary and Mr. Collins from that day onwards. Though she did not see a powerful love on either side, she saw that there was a mutual level of respect between them. Mary did

not scoff at Mr. Collin's idiocy, and Mr. Collins was complimentary of Mary's rather highhanded morals. They were blind to each other's faults, and Elizabeth did not know whether that something to applaud or be wary of. She thought that for herself, she did not want a love so blind, but in Mary's case, mayhap that was for the better.

So distracted was she in watching her sister that she did not notice Mr. Bingley addressing her when he came to call one morning.

"Oh, I am sorry, Mr. Bingley. I have been woolgathering too often these days," apologised Elizabeth.

"You were studying characters again, were you not?" asked Mr. Bingley, grinning.

Elizabeth blushed at being caught. "I was."

"And what did you find?"

"Oh, I do not know if I can say."

"You cannot leave me hanging so, Miss Bennet! Please, you may be frank with me, as I will be frank with you."

"You have taken up the study of characters as well, Mr. Bingley?"

"Indeed I have, after being so intrigued by the act from you! Here, I will tell you what I have seen, and you may judge my skills. I have observed that your cousin, Mr. Collins, and your sister, Miss Mary, are much alike. They are both ambitious, confident, and religious. If you do not mind me saying, I think that they would suit well."

"Not a single word of disparagement! You are much like Jane in that regard. Yet, what you have said is not untrue. I am afraid I am more cynical. I was thinking that my friend Charlotte was right; people are fools when they are in love."

"Ah, an ominous, but wise statement," said Mr. Bingley. "I can only hope that I am not so foolish."

He was looking very pointedly at Elizabeth, and for the first time that day, she noticed that something was different during the particular call. After glancing around the room to double check, she realised that Mr. Darcy, who had always been at Mr. Bingley's side during his visits, was not present. A brief feeling of disappointment ran through her before she was overcome with a wave of uneasiness at Bingley's mien and remark.

"I have never been in love before, so perhaps I judge too critically on those who do appear foolish in their romantic state," stated Elizabeth, hoping that Mr. Bingley would get the subtle message that she was not in love with him.

Mr. Bingley seemed surprised, but not at all disappointed, and continued the conversation as friendly as ever. So unaffected was he that Elizabeth suspected that he did not carry a fondness for her after all. She thought of Jane, and how he *did* ask after her health a great deal. In an effort fueled by wishful thinking, she concluded that her

family and neighbours were wrong; if Bingley was enamoured by a Bennet, it must have been Jane.

On one particular outing to Meryton, Kitty and Lydia had dragged Elizabeth and Mary, and thus Mr. Collins, to meet some newly arrived officers, particularly the handsome and charming Mr. Wickham. Once introduced, the man observed Elizabeth with great interest, and eagerly initiated conversation. Elizabeth immediately liked his pleasant manners, which she thought equal to Mr. Bingley's. They got along well, and soon were laughing and smiling together. Such was the sight that Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, who were riding through Meryton themselves, stumbled upon. Darcy and Wickham immediately spied each other. Elizabeth watched with great curiosity as one man grew red, and the other white.

Disgusted by Wickham, Darcy knew he had to quickly leave the area before he throttled the man in front of Elizabeth and the entire town of Meryton. He was about to do so, when Bingley jumped off his horse and started walking towards the party.

"Bingley," said Darcy. His friend waved him off.

"Let us say hello, Darcy." Bingley had, with massive disapproval, seen how handsome the redcoat standing beside Elizabeth was, and did not like how he raked his eyes over her.

Forced to follow Bingley, Darcy sighed and muttered to him, "I know one of the men. Wickham, my father's godson."

"Which one is he?"

"He is next to Miss Elizabeth."

Both men frowned as they watched Wickham lean closer to Elizabeth and whisper her something.

"You may have mentioned the name once or twice. It is familiar," said Bingley, trying to remember anything Darcy had ever told him about a Mr. Wickham. He succeeded with some alarm. "The son of Pemberley's steward? The one who has gone wild?"

Darcy nodded.

"Is it safe for the Bennet ladies to be near them?" asked Bingley.

"He is in a uniform, and to our knowledge, the ladies have little dowry to entice him."

"Comforting as that is to hear, I would like to observe his character myself. I do not like how he looks at Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

Unlike Darcy, Bingley did not let any of his wariness for Wickham show upon joining the group. He greeted everyone with a large smile, and eagerly accepted the invitation to cards at the Phillips's. All the while, he stayed close to Elizabeth, not wanting the attractive Wickham to take up her attention. He was lucky, upon entering the Phillips's residence, when Wickham stayed on the other side of the room – although the officer did seem to glance often at the trio

Bingley, Elizabeth, and Darcy made up.

Darcy was even more dour than usual. He had said not a word since he joined the larger party, even when Wickham had said his name in polite greeting. His mood suffered greatly, and in order to restrain himself from demanding Wickham leave the premises, he had to focus on Elizabeth's lovely smiles and conversation. Both Elizabeth and Bingley noticed his unease, and inquired after him. He replied that he was well, but did not elaborate.

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Wickham?" asked Elizabeth after some silence caused entirely by Darcy's grimness.

"Mr. Wickham," said Darcy, glaring at the man in question. The redcoat at that moment glanced at the trio, turned white at Darcy's glower, and looked away.

"I am sorry to say, Miss Elizabeth, but Mr. Wickham is not a man to be trusted," informed Bingley, when Darcy did not answer further.

"Oh!" cried Elizabeth, eyes wide. "I would never have thought. His manners were so pleasant when we were introduced."

Darcy spoke with no little irritation, "His manners are pleasant indeed."

Elizabeth frowned and asked, "Are you familiar with Mr. Wickham as well, Mr. Bingley?"

"I have only met him today," replied he, "but the little I have been told of his history is unfavourable. I am not one to gossip, Darcy, but I do wish you would tell me about your dealings with Mr. Wickham, especially if he is to be in the neighbourhood long. No doubt Miss Elizabeth, whose hobby is to sketch the characters of others, would like to know as well."

Darcy stiffened. For a long moment, he stared at Bingley and Elizabeth. Both had the eyes of inquisitive puppies, and the lady's eyes in particular could not be denied. They were too large, too round, too curious, and too lovely. He could not refuse them if he tried.

Moving Bingley and Elizabeth to a corner of the room where none could eavesdrop on them, Darcy began to speak of his long, tedious history with George Wickham. He enlightened them on how Wickham took three thousand pounds in lieu of the vicar living his late father intended him, as his godson, to have. When he spoke of how Wickham had shortly later wasted it all and asked for even more money, Bingley and Elizabeth nearly cried out at the audacity.

"But how did he spend so much in so little time?" asked Bingley.

Darcy glanced hesitantly at Elizabeth, who eyed him back undauntedly.

"I will not be frightened by whatever you say," said she.

"I expect no less from you," replied Darcy. "Mr. Wickham is known to have many debts. They mainly pertain to gambling, but I have

heard that he has a great number of other vices – participating in unlawful trades, frequenting houses of ill repute, and paying others to do his bidding are among the few of them.”

“Darcy!” exclaimed Bingley. “That is no speech for a lady’s ears.”

“I only answer to her.”

“Indeed, I am not offended by it,” said Elizabeth. She looked every bit angered for Darcy’s sake. “I am stunned by Mr. Wickham’s actions and sorry that you ever had to deal with such a man, Mr. Darcy. I only hope that he is reformed now and that he causes no problems in Meryton, but at present his character to me is marred by his past actions.”

Darcy smiled at her sentiments. “My feelings are the same as yours. As I have said before; my good opinion, once lost, is lost forever.”

“It is not a little deal losing Darcy’s good opinion,” Bingley said to Elizabeth. “You cannot have a more powerful ally than he.”

“Is that so?” replied Elizabeth. The fondness in her expression warmed Darcy’s heart.

Bingley was then subject to the consequences of being amiable, and was called away by some neighbour. Darcy, alone with Elizabeth, and encouraged by her inquisitive eyes and prior outrage at Wickham, felt comfortable enough to speak of his sister’s near elopement with the seducer that took place only a few months ago. Although he felt a sense of relief after confessing the tale to her, the person whose opinion and trust he realised mattered most to him, he almost regretted it when he saw the tears that threatened to spill down her face.

“Miss Elizabeth, allow me to apologise for causing you distress.” Not know what to do, he panicked. His first instinct was to embrace her in an act to comfort the both of them, but he could not ignore propriety, especially under her aunt’s guest-filled roof. He remembered, finally and perhaps miraculously, at least some of his gentlemanly senses, and offered Elizabeth the handkerchief in his pocket.

“You need not apologise, sir,” replied Elizabeth. She gratefully accepted the cloth. “Your poor sister. I cannot imagine her feelings. To be the victim of one she believed an old friend, to be betrayed by the appearance of goodness; my heart goes out to her.”

“Thank you for your understanding. You do not know how much that means for me and my sister.” Truly, he was touched deeply by her reaction. He had always known her to be compassionate, but her complete concern for his and his sisters wellbeing surpassed his imaginations. He knew, at that very moment, that he cared not for their differences in society; he was determined to marry Elizabeth, and eager to acquaint her with his sister. Catharsis overcame him, and he smiled. The soft smile he received in return was different from

anything he had ever seen from her. His heart sped at the implication.

When she made to return his handkerchief, he insisted she keep it.

“I will have it perfectly cleaned for you when we next meet, then,” said she.

“That will not be necessary.”

Elizabeth flushed, and looked away from Darcy’s intense gaze. He saw her hands grip at the soft cloth, which she raised again to her face. Though he did not spy any more tears, he thought, to his immense satisfaction, that he glimpsed a blush.

Chapter 7

The Netherfield Ball brought significant excitement to the neighbourhood. It was not often there was a private ball, let alone any gathering as sophisticatedly put together as the event Miss Bingley had prepared. Elizabeth was looking forward to the night, and only wished that Jane was present to enjoy the festivities. *If Jane was here, she thought, she would look handsomer than ever. Mr. Bingley might fall in love with her, and everyone would cease their awful insinuations about him fancying me!*

“Lizzy, you must not touch your hair so! Look, a curl has already strayed,” fussed Mrs. Bennet as their carriage rode down the path to Netherfield. The matron, who had usually made sure her eldest and youngest were the best dressed, had redirected all her attention to her second and third children. Elizabeth and Mary had been subject to their mother’s expertise on how fitted their dresses should be, how their hairs were to be styled, which jewelry to adorn, and so forth, to the former’s dismay and the latter’s delight. The only good to come out of it for Elizabeth was a new gown she adored.

The effort put into Mary’s appearance was substantial, but to her and Mrs. Bennet’s initial dismay, Mr. Collins did not seem to take note of it. He had complimented all of the Bennet ladies when he saw them by the carriage, and had handed Mary into the carriage himself, but did not say anything of her beauty in particular.

“Mary, you have never looked so becoming as you do tonight. Do you not think so, Mr. Collins?” Mrs. Bennet pointedly asked.

Mr. Collins finally took notice of Mary’s appearance and agreed almost too profusely to be genuine, but Mrs. Bennet and Mary were at least satisfied by his response.

Within minutes of walking inside Netherfield, the Bennets and Mr. Collins were greeted by the receiving line of Mr. Bingley and his sisters. Mr. Bingley did not take his eyes off Elizabeth once she entered his vision. Elizabeth blushed, more out of mortification from her parents’ quips than Mr. Bingley’s compliments.

“You look lovely, Miss Bennet. I have never seen such beauty before me,” said Bingley, gratified, but mistaken, by Elizabeth’s pinkness. Besides him, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst smiled, but they looked as if they would rather roll their eyes, especially when Elizabeth returned a compliment.

When Bingley, the good host he was, turned to address Elizabeth's sisters, she unconsciously searched the room for Mr. Darcy. She had rarely seen him not beside his friend in gatherings, and was curious whether or not he would attend at all; he had been so miserable at the assembly many weeks ago.

"Are you looking for someone, Miss Bennet?" asked Bingley.

Elizabeth reddened, embarrassed that she was caught, and answered, "No. No, I'm not. I was admiring the elegance of the room. You have transformed it exquisitely, Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst."

"Thank you, Miss Eliza," said Miss Bingley. Then, as if knowing who Elizabeth was searching for, she continued, "We have Mr. Darcy to thank for the fine musicians, however. Without his connections, they may never have found their way to this little countryside."

Unstirred, Elizabeth replied, "I cannot wait to hear them play."

Bingley then addressed Elizabeth again, securing her hand for the first set. Mrs. Bennet practically preened at the notice, while Elizabeth was inwardly wincing; she was not opposed to dancing with Mr. Bingley, but had hoped that he would have asked her for a more insignificant set for the sake of her sanity in the company of her mother.

By the time the strings started playing and she was escorted to dance by Mr. Bingley, she still had not glimpsed Mr. Darcy, and instead was witness to her mother gloating in the background. Mr. Bingley was either deaf to Mrs. Bennet or so kind that he ignored the matron for her sake. He was an expert at conversation, and in no time at all Elizabeth was enjoying herself. Glancing at the stumbling Mr. Collins across from Mary, she even revised her opinion and considered herself lucky to pair with someone so marvelous a dancer.

"What do you think of the ball thus far?" Bingley asked.

Elizabeth replied truthfully, "It is absolutely splendid. I have no doubt that Hertfordshire will be speaking of it for years to come. You and your sisters must be very proud; I know I would be if I had planned such a magnificent event."

"Your praise is too high! I cannot devour it all, though I dearly wish to. I know you to be very discerning; tell me, what could be improved for our next ball? There must be something."

"As a matter of fact, there is."

"Ah, my instincts were correct! Pray, tell me what is missing. I must know the particulars."

"Why, my sister Jane of course. I have not attended a ball without her, and I am sure that the rest of our friends feel bereft without her stunning beauty and calming presence."

"Have you heard from her in town? Is she well? I admit I was worried for her, when she was ill under this roof."

Elizabeth grew a bit excited, believing that Mr. Bingley was taking an active interest in her sister. "Yes, I hear from her often. She is completely well, and enjoying her time in town with our nieces and nephews, who absolutely adore her. She writes, however, with immense disappointment that she is sad to miss your ball."

"Then I must throw another one, for when she returns! Perhaps for the Christmas season?"

Elizabeth beamed. "You will not only win over my sister, but the whole of Hertfordshire if you do!"

Shocked by the beauty of Elizabeth's smile, Bingley nearly tripped over his own foot. His recovery, however, was smooth, and for the rest of the dance they maintained lively conversation. Bingley discovered that Elizabeth appeared the brightest while talking about her elder sister, so he eagerly engaged her in the topic.

Elizabeth, by the end of the set, was happier than she had been in the beginning. Mr. Bingley had asked so many questions about Jane that she was sure that her sister was the one he admired, despite what everyone else said. She began to think of him as a potential brother-in-law, whose only fault she observed thus far was that he smiled too often.

"Mr. Bingley pays you a great deal of attention," Charlotte said to her after the set. "His friend, too, stares at you often."

"His friend?"

"Mr. Darcy."

"Mr. Darcy is here? I did not see him," said Elizabeth. She scouted the room for him, and saw his tall form brooding in a corner next to Mr. Hurst, who had a drink in his hand. As Charlotte had said, he was staring directly at her, and she wondered why she was so surprised, despite the warning, to witness it. Heat rushed through her and she immediately returned her attention to Charlotte.

"You were looking for him," spoke Charlotte with no little amount of slyness. "Oh dear, you must also deal with the attentions of Mr. Bingley. Which gentlemen will you choose?"

"I choose none of them," said Elizabeth. "There is no reason for you to believe that Mr. Darcy feels anything other than friendship for me, and Mr. Bingley pays everyone a great deal of attention that his courtesy to my person is hardly significant. In fact, from my last dance with him I garner that he might be interested in Jane! Would they not make a handsome pair?"

"*Jane?* Jane is not even here!"

"Yes, and the whole of our discussion was about her! Surely, Mr. Bingley admires her at least a little. A man does not inquire so much after a lady if he does not like her."

"Lovely as Jane is, *you* think too well of her. *You* are always

bringing her up in conversation. I would bet that Mr. Bingley only spoke of her to respond to you, or to see you animated.”

“You did not hear how enthusiastic he was to know of Jane’s every detail.”

Charlotte shook her head at Elizabeth. “My dear Eliza, you should not insist on that particular pair when you have the opportunity to find love with the man himself.”

Before Elizabeth could respond, she was approached by Mr. Darcy.

“Miss Bennet, may I have the next set?” he asked.

Elizabeth silently commanded her heart to calm and Charlotte to cease her meaningful expression. “You may,” she answered.

He held out his hand, and Elizabeth’s placed hers on it. She marveled at its warmth, and was not alone in the feeling.

Darcy was a gone man.

He had been entranced by Elizabeth’s beauty since he spied her entering the room, and up close, Elizabeth was even more stunning – so much so that he was rendered speechless as he brought her to the line of dancers. In his daze, he did not hear Bingley, who was partnering with Kitty, comment on how delighted he was that his two friends were getting along for once instead of verbally sparring.

“Mr. Darcy?” Darcy heard Elizabeth ask.

He shook out of his stupor. Vaguely, he recalled her saying something about his silence, and as he replied, he hoped he was intelligible. Elizabeth’s questioning gaze was not hopeful in the slightest, and he sought to correct his blunder.

“Forgive me, Miss Bennet.” He intended to apologise further, but his mind and tongue, responding rather pathetically to Elizabeth’s animated form, betrayed him into awkward quietness.

“I think I have found you out,” said Elizabeth.

“And what exactly have you found?” Darcy was curious, and thought that Elizabeth’s twinkling eyes were so very lovely.

“I only offer a conjecture. That is, you do not partake in this particular art often because you cannot dance and converse at the same time.” She had timed her jest well, as they were separated for a moment in the steps.

“I assure you, madam, that I am able to simultaneously talk and dance just fine,” Darcy replied when they were reunited.

“Oh? Should I be injured by your lack of response to my comments earlier?”

“Do not be.” Darcy did not dare to elaborate further, else he accidentally propose to her in the middle of the set. He was very, very tempted to do so, with Elizabeth there in his grasp, and decided that silence was the best alternative.

The result was an escalating tension between them, and Elizabeth,

regaining a bit of *her* senses, thought it better to not speak either. She found herself too attracted to Mr. Darcy's deep voice, especially when he was so near to her that she was overwhelmed by his scent.

All too soon, or perhaps not soon enough, the set was over, and the two parted ways with muddled minds. Elizabeth was alarmed at how much she felt for Darcy, and although she did not know if she loved him yet, she was sure that she felt *something*, and did not know what to do with that information.

"You must be in need of some refreshment, Eliza," Charlotte told her as she approached. "Here."

The offered drink accepted, Elizabeth took a long sip and wrinkled her nose at the taste. "I suppose that accommodations were made for Mr. Hurst."

"Shall I retrieve something weaker for you?" Charlotte asked.

"No, thank you. This is fine."

"So Eliza, now that you have danced with both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, which man do you prefer?"

"Charlotte!"

"If I am honest, I think that it is more likely for you to garner a proposal from Mr. Bingley, which might be for the best. By and by, Mr. Darcy may be richer, but Mr. Bingley is more agreeable. And as the mistress of Netherfield, you would be so near to us, and I could call on you in the future with as much frequency as I call on you now."

"Charlotte, your imagination has gone too wild. Perhaps you have had too much of Mr. Hurst's refreshments? You know that I would only marry for the deepest of love, which I have yet to experience, and as I told you earlier, I am sure that Mr. Bingley is interested in Jane and not I."

Elizabeth was then asked to dance by a neighbour, thereby escaping hearing any more speculations from Charlotte.

Near the end of the evening, Elizabeth was once again asked by Bingley to dance. She wished to refuse him in order to demonstrate to Charlotte and her family that she had no interest in becoming Mrs. Charles Bingley, but she had promised another neighbour and her father the last two sets. Her father in particular rarely danced, and he had asked so earnestly that she would have felt terrible if she retracted her earlier acceptance. Thus, she graciously allowed Mr. Bingley to lead her to the line of other dancing couples. A bit reddened and relaxed from the beverages Charlotte had given her earlier, she endeavoured to enjoy herself, no matter the teasing she would later have to put up with.

The pair were observed by Mr. Darcy, who had thought nothing of his friend's gesture until Sir William Lucas came up to him and made

an unfortunate, but enlightening comment.

“What?” Darcy froze. He had been focused on both Elizabeth and Bingley the majority of the evening, but never once thought anything along the lines of what Sir William had implied. In fact, only ten minutes ago he was silently applauding Bingley for not spiling about some silly infatuation again. When his gaze shifted to his friend’s face, he was struck with sudden dread and realisation.

“One wedding often incites another,” Sir William stated gleefully, glancing meaningfully between Mr. Collins and Mary near the refreshment table, and Bingley and Elizabeth in the midst of their set, before he went to bother another attendee, leaving Darcy alone to question his senses.

Every interaction Elizabeth made with Bingley was seen with new light, and the longer he observed them, the more he thought himself foolishly blind for not coming to the horrific conclusion sooner. That Bingley was in love again was undoubtable. Even a stranger would have realised, with a single glance, that he was hit by cupid’s bow. How did Darcy fail to observe it? *Yet he did notice, before.* He was refreshed with the memory of his first night in Meryton, when Bingley had dragged everyone to the assembly, and had danced twice with Elizabeth. His own observation of the lady had actually started because he worried that Bingley was falling into some ill-founded infatuation with a lady he had just met. Once his examination of Elizabeth turned into great admiration, he became so focused on himself and his own desires, that he swiftly forgot about Bingley’s initial interest.

Suddenly, he could not stop seeing terrifying truth after terrifying truth. The worst of these enlightenments was that Bingley’s feelings appeared more serious than ever before, and the neighbourhood was certainly catching onto it. Bingley was raising expectations, if Sir William Lucas and Mrs. Bennet’s loud, uncouth chatter were to be believed, and Darcy watched with confusion as Elizabeth laughed and danced with his friend, her entire being flushed with pink. She had never been so carefree with himself, and Darcy grew jealous, but most of all, unsure of her affections. His mind raced to the point where he deliberated whether or not she was still in possession of his handkerchief, dearly hoping she did not discard his token of affection in favour of one of Bingley’s new books.

When Bingley stepped far too close to Elizabeth for comfort, Darcy’s resulting grimace nearly caused a staff passing by to drop a tray full of glass. Utterly frustrated, there was one thing Darcy knew was for certain; regardless of Elizabeth’s feelings, Bingley had to be pulled away from her, and move on to a new angel. Even in the terrible case that Elizabeth did love Bingley, their marriage could never happen –

not when Darcy wanted to marry her himself.

Chapter 8

Elizabeth had never felt so relieved as she did the morning after the Netherfield ball, when she received a note from Miss Bingley, stating that Netherfield was closing and that Mr. Bingley was eager to meet his fiancée, Miss Darcy, back in town. She had to deal with her mother's, and surprisingly her father's, disappointments regarding her lack of proposals, but given that she would have been mortified if she received one, that was a small nuisance to deal with. With Mr. Bingley gone, her family would eventually cease wishing aloud their hopes for her, and beyond that she was excited, for his being in town meant that he was in the same area as *Jane*. She was certain that Mr. Bingley was not at all engaged to another, especially if the lady in question was Miss Darcy. In regard to Miss Darcy's brother, she could not help but feel a little sad that he had left the neighbourhood with his friends, but more than that, she was relieved as well; she thought a bit of distance between them would be good. After great deliberation in her bed last night, she came to the conclusion, to the slight protest of her heart, that she did not want to be in love with Mr. Darcy. Thus, she was sure that, if he remained away from Hertfordshire, in little time she would think and feel nothing of him.

Surprisingly, Elizabeth's youngest sisters, entirely certain of Mr. Bingley's devotion to her, did not believe Miss Bingley's written word.

"La, he will return to you, Lizzy," stated Lydia, making a show of throwing Miss Bingley's note into the fire.

"I hope not," replied Elizabeth, frowning. She had wished that everyone else in her family would take Miss Bingley's words as the truth, even if she did not believe half of its content herself.

"You should hope that he does! Else you will forever be known as jilted, and it does not bode well for me to have a jilted sister."

"Lydia, you should not speak so. I have never encouraged Mr. Bingley, and you know that I do not love him enough to consider matrimony."

"Oh, but Lizzy, *he loves you!* I am sure that with time, you would grow to love him. I would love him if I were you." Kitty sighed dreamily. "Think of the dresses you would have, Lizzy."

Lydia added, "And the carriages! Why, Miss Bingley is just an uptight shrew. No doubt she wrote a bunch of lies."

"Lydia!"

“Lydia is right,” said Mrs. Bennet, walking into the room. “Mr. Bingley could not have been engaged all this time. No doubt, he only has some great business to attend to in town, and his sisters, for reasons I cannot fathom, are scheming to keep him there. But you will have to go to London as well, Lizzy, to remind him to make you an offer.”

“Mama, I will not go chasing after Mr. Bingley.”

“You most certainly will.”

“Papa!” exclaimed Elizabeth, turning to her father who had just entered the room for help. Mr. Collins and Mary trailed behind him.

“But of course you will need to go to London,” said he. “You will need to help your sister pick her trousseau. As of this morning, Mr. Collins and Mary are engaged to marry.”

Elizabeth, Kitty, and Lydia paused everything they had been doing and stared wide-eyed at the couple. Both Mr. Collins and Mary stood tall, with miens of extreme satisfaction.

“Oh, Mary! My dear girl! How wonderful, to be the next mistress of Longbourn!” cried Mrs. Bennet, moving to hug her middle child. “Longbourn will remain in our family, as it was always meant to be! Your father is right, you must pick your trousseau in town. And Lizzy, you *will* go as well. Mr. Bingley might be your only chance to marry a more than decent gentleman, and you will not waste it! Oh, my dear Mary! Come, we must plan for the wedding immediately.”

Elizabeth sighed. At least, she thought, she would be with Jane again.

Then, Mr. Bennet ruined her hopes when he declared he would take Jane back to Longbourn after escorting her and Mary to town, claiming that he needed at least *some* sense in the house while Elizabeth was away.

“And my morning had started out so well,” murmured Elizabeth into her pillow later that night. “Mary married to the foolish Mr. Collins! And papa and mama forcing me to go to London.”

She rolled over and stared the drawer next to her. Mr. Darcy’s handkerchief, the one he had given her after she teared up hearing his tale of Miss Darcy, was hidden within it under a pile of her own handkerchiefs. She would have to bring it to London, else her mother rummage through her room and realise she was in possession of a man’s item. She blushed thinking about it. *No*, she told herself, *Mr. Darcy will not faze me. I do not love him*. She certainly hoped that she didn’t. Elizabeth rolled over again and stared at the ceiling, trying to distract herself from thinking about Mr. Darcy’s intense blue eyes.

Three days later, Netherfield was still closed, and Elizabeth, Mary, and Mr. Bennet were on their way to London. When Mary fell asleep in the carriage, Mr. Bennet addressed his other daughter.

"You will call on your friends, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth startled from her book. "I suppose it is only polite of me to, however I would not precisely refer to the group of us friends."

"But you get along with them, do you not?"

"We are civil to each other. They are more Jane's friends than mine, though as far as I am aware, they did not write to her when she left to town."

"That is a shame."

"To Jane, perhaps, but I am indifferent."

"Surely, Mr. Bingley's sisters have some redeeming qualities."

"I am sure Jane would be able to list them all."

Mr. Bennet hummed. "That is well. You and your younger sisters are not the closest of friends either, and you tolerate them just fine."

"Yes, we may have different personalities and interests, but I do love them." Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "I do not know how it relates to my relationship with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst."

"Do you not know?"

"Papa."

"Come, Lizzy. I know you are vexed that Mr. Bingley has left for town, but you cannot let that get in the way of your affection for him. It is not love without a little vexation," said Mr. Bennet. He took out his book and started to read while Elizabeth gaped at him.

"You are mistaken, sir, for I have never liked Mr. Bingley in the way you believe," she stated.

"It is, I suppose, expected of ladies to protest too much before admitting their feelings on matters such as these."

"I am in earnest!" cried Elizabeth. "You must rid any notion you have of Mr. Bingley and me. I hold no affection for him other than friendship, and he holds none for me."

"Now you are simply being ridiculous."

"I beg your pardon?"

Mr. Bennet removed his eyes from his book. "You cannot, in all seriousness, tell me that Mr. Bingley does not carry any affection for you."

"I can indeed tell you that. I am of the mind that he likes Jane. He asked after her countlessly at his ball."

"Do not delude yourself, my dear girl. Jane is not the one he asks about whenever we speak. I daresay an inquiry of a lady to a father holds more merit than an inquiry of a lady to the lady's sister, who almost enjoys praising her as much as our cousin Mr. Collins enjoys praising his patroness. Mr. Bingley is smitten with you, and I think that deep in your heart and mind, you know that I am right."

Elizabeth studied her father's face, and in a moment of rarity, found him to be completely serious. Finally, she found her voice. "Be that as

it may, *my* feelings for Mr. Bingley remain strictly platonic.”

“I believe that you are sensible enough,” said Mr. Bennet. “Mr. Bingley is a good man. He is kind and rich, and cannot have better manners. He is also handsome, which can be no detriment, especially to young ladies such as yourself. There are worse foundations for marriages to be based on.”

“Papa, you are too hasty. Mr. Bingley has yet to propose, and if he does, I will refuse him. No matter how much I think well of him, I cannot be married to a man I do not love,” protested Elizabeth.

Mr. Bennet sighed. “I am disheartened that you do not yet return Mr. Bingley’s feelings –”

“I will never love him.”

“That is hasty declaration, child, and even if it proves to be true, when there is love on one hand, and respect on the other, I advise you to choose respect.”

Elizabeth knew her father was speaking out of his own experience in his marriage to her mother. Though she understood where her father was coming from, she did not agree with his take. “I will not marry unless I am certain I have both love *and* respect.”

“That is a lot to wish for in this day and age, Lizzy, when a lady seldom chooses their husband.”

Elizabeth stiffened. “Has Mr. Bingley asked for a courtship or marriage?”

“No,” answered her father to her relief.

“Then there is no reason for us to speak of him at all.”

“Very well, but please do consider what we have discussed. I want what is best for you, my little girl; soon I will grow old, and I would like to see you cared for before I die. If an unworthy suitor such as Mr. Collins approached me asking for your hand, I would adamantly refuse. Mr. Bingley is by no means Mr. Collins.”

“It would not do for you to speak so of your future son-in-law and heir,” stated Elizabeth, looking pointedly at the sleeping Mary.

“Come, Lizzy, we both know that you think him a fool as do I.” Mr. Bennet shook his head at her and resumed reading his book for the remainder of the ride.

It turned out that Mary, who had enjoyed being fussed over by Mrs. Bennet in light of being the first daughter to be married, developed a newfound loyalty to the matron. Thus, within two days in town, she obeyed her mother’s command from Longbourn and promptly dragged Elizabeth to pay a call on the Bingley sisters. Under normal circumstances, Elizabeth would have ignored her sister’s plea; since her conversation with her father, she had been determined not to see a single Bingley while she was in London. She decided to indulge her sister, however, if only for the fact that Mary would be stuck with Mr.

Collins for the rest of her life, and Elizabeth endeavoured to make her happy during her remaining time of freedom.

Thankfully, Mr. Bingley was not present when the Bennet sisters called on the Hurst townhouse, a fact that brought Elizabeth much-needed ease. As the visit progressed, she was increasingly peeved by the Bingley sisters' hostile treatment of her and Mary, but there was comfort in presuming that the Bingley sisters' dislike meant that they would dissuade their brother from pursuing her.

"You are engaged to a great reader, are you not?" Miss Bingley asked Mary. "I remember Mr. Collins talking readily about books. In that regard, he is much like your sister."

Elizabeth returned Miss Bingley's uncivil smile. "You are mistaken. Mr. Collins is a much greater reader than I, and our tastes in books cannot be more different."

"And are you excited to join the state of matrimony?" Miss Bingley again addressed Mary. "Why, a younger daughter married before not one, but two elder sisters! You must be proud indeed."

"Yes, I am eager to be married to Mr. Collins," said Mary. Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at how Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst tried to suppress their laughter. Mary continued, "Though my elder sisters are not without suitors. Jane had a man who sent her poetry when she was but fifteen. And recently, Lizzy had garnered the attentions of..."

The silence as Mary trailed off could not have been more awkward. Everyone knew she meant to say Mr. Bingley, and not one person in the room was happy with the implication. Eager to change the subject and get the visit over with, Elizabeth inquired about Miss Darcy, half hoping that her supposed engagement with Mr. Bingley was true, and half hoping that Miss Bingley would be caught in a lie.

"Oh, yes, dear Miss Darcy," Miss Bingley said cautiously. "We hope to see her later in the week. Charles will be especially eager to see her again. Is that not right, Louisa?"

Mrs. Hurst more evidently, though unintentionally, revealed that there was no understanding between their brother and the young lady when she answered, "Yes, it has been too long since we have seen her last winter."

Miss Bingley glared at her sister, and Mrs. Hurst all too late seemed to realise her mistake, as she stopped fiddling with her bracelet and reddened.

"You forget, sister, that we had seen Miss Darcy only this past the summer," corrected Miss Bingley. She then went into extensive detail on when and where they had enjoyed Miss Darcy's company, unaware that Elizabeth had it on good authority, from Mr. Darcy no less, that Miss Darcy was in Ramsgate during their supposed teas and shopping excursions. Elizabeth was dearly curious on what would have occurred

if she called out Miss Bingley's lies, but in the end thought better of it. She did not want the visit to be any more uncomfortable, nor did she want to be subject to Mary's dreadful lectures later. Half of her believed that if she worded a quip correctly, it would have gone over Mary's head, but she decided not to risk it.

To everyone but Mary's delight, Elizabeth was soon able to find an instance to appropriately end the call. The door opened in advance on her and Mary's way out, and for a brief moment Elizabeth was frightened that Mr. Bingley had returned. Fortunately for her, it was only Mr. Hurst, and she was able to make her way back to the Gardiners, more hopeful than ever that she would not have to see Mr. Bingley at all in London.

"You see, Mary, that my presence was not welcome," said Elizabeth once they were in the carriage.

"They will return your call. Propriety dictates it, and Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst are refined ladies," replied Mary.

Elizabeth sighed. Mary was right, but she could hope that any calls paid by the Bingley's would be short and void of any gentlemen.

Later that evening, Mr. Darcy was over at the Hurst residence for dinner. He arrived with Bingley after they had spent the day conducting business at Darcy House, and while he was in his dinner attire, Bingley had to run upstairs to change. Thus, Darcy was left for an extended moment in the company of Mr. Hurst, Mrs. Hurst, and Miss Bingley.

"Darcy, can I task you to tell Bingley later that his angel called earlier today? She was with her sister – the plain one," said Mr. Hurst. "I will certainly forget to tell him myself later."

"Mr. Hurst!" exclaimed his wife.

Darcy tried to hide his alarm. What could Elizabeth be doing in town? He had intended to go back to Hertfordshire after Bingley found another angel, yet with her not there, but here, calling on Bingley's sisters no less, his plans were in a jumble.

"I implore everyone not to tell Charles of Eliza's presence in town. His infatuation with her simply must end. With her unimpressive appearance, unrefined manners, dreadful family, and lack of fortune and connections – Eliza Bennet is no suitable bride," said Miss Bingley, emphasizing her last sentence to Mr. Darcy.

Hurst raised an eyebrow. "I do not wish for or expect Bingley to marry her for the reasons you just listed, in addition to her not enjoying cards or ragout, but let the man live while he can. A little flirtation with the lovely Miss Eliza Bennet will not hurt him."

"Mr. Hurst!" repeated his wife.

Darcy clenched his fists, equally incensed by Miss Bingley's and Mr. Hurst's quips.

“Eliza is to be the sister of Mr. Collins,” said Miss Bingley in a cross between amusement and distaste. “The Bennet family is growing in fools! Though I suppose he was already family before, distant cousin as he was, and Mary Bennet certainly could not do better. Nonetheless, it is plain that we cannot let Charles get further acquainted with Eliza, is it not? What are your thoughts, Mr. Darcy?”

Finally, Darcy spoke, “Miss Bennet called on you and your sister, and not your brother. Certainly, you both are of an age or position in life where Bingley does not need to be informed of the ladies who call on you, let alone the nature of the call itself, particularly if he had previously approved of your friendship with the lady, and particularly if the house where the lady calls is not his own.”

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were satisfied with the answer. If Mr. Hurst were not indifferent, and a tad more proactive, he would have bothered to reveal to Bingley, who had just entered the room, what they had been discussing. Alas, he was a lazy man, and as no one else was inclined to inform Bingley of Elizabeth’s presence in town, Bingley went to dinner unenlightened.

“Shall we go back to Hertfordshire?” asked Bingley during the middle of the meal. “Business took longer than expected, although I am glad that you made sure I went over those papers thrice over, Darcy. I hated the process, but could not be happier with the results.”

Miss Bingley put down her fork. “Charles, you cannot be seriously returning to that society.”

“Did you not like it there?” Bingley was genuinely surprised.

Hurst laughed. “Were you deaf to her complaints while we were at Netherfield?”

“Of course it is naturally difficult to adjust to a new area,” said Bingley. “I had hoped you would grow to like it, with time.”

Miss Bingley replied, “I’m afraid it is the opposite. I had grown to dislike it with each passing day.”

“You must have enjoyed some parts of our stay there. What of the people? You were friends with the eldest Miss Bennets.”

“Jane, perhaps,” said Mrs. Hurst, “but she left before we could truly make her acquaintance.”

“Of all our neighbours, you were most in the company of Miss Elizabeth. Did you not write to her when we left for town?” asked Bingley. “Did she not write a letter of her own?”

“She did not.” Miss Bingley sniffed. “It is a good thing too. We know you thought highly of her, Charles, but you should not have paid her so much attention.”

“Of course I should have,” replied he. “I plan to marry her.”

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst gaped at their brother. Mr. Hurst raised an eyebrow. Darcy choked on his food.

“Darcy! Are you well?”

“Mr. Darcy! Are you in need of assistance?”

Darcy coughed. “I am fine, but you are in need of a desperate change of mind, Bingley. You cannot marry Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Whyever not?” Bingley frowned. “I know this may come to a surprise, as I wanted to be sure of my affections before I said anything to you all, but after the ball, I can say, with great confidence, that I love Miss Elizabeth Bennet as I have never loved anyone before.”

“But you cannot know that she loves you,” countered Darcy.

“Of course I can!” cried Bingley, his frown transforming into a smile.

“What?” Darcy felt as if he wanted to expel his dinner.

“Well, she was not at all demure,” said Bingley. “Her smiles and laughter towards myself were in abundance. I am certain of her affections.”

“Do not flatter yourself. It is Eliza’s nature to lack restraint on her emotions. She smiles and laughs during every conversation, whether you are there or not,” stated Miss Bingley.

“That is not true. She rarely bestows her angelic smiles at you,” refuted Bingley. He looked at each other person in the room. “Nor did she bestow them on you, or you, or you.”

Darcy disagreed. “Miss Elizabeth has often smiled at me before.”

“That is quite the joke, Darcy. We all know that Elizabeth glared and argued with you most of the time. I do not know how you were not frightened by the menacing way she regarded you. Though, she seemed to warm up to you more recently. It is quite a good thing, for I would have suffered greatly if my love and my best friend did not tolerate each other.”

“Elizabeth is not your love,” stated Darcy. “She cannot love you.”

Bingley furrowed his brow and asked his friend to explain himself.

Darcy was an honest man. He abhorred deception. Thus, he surprised himself when he blurted out, “Miss Elizabeth will soon be engaged to marry another!”

All around the table, everyone gasped and dropped whatever they were holding, excluding Mr. Hurst, who continued to gobble down his dinner. Darcy berated himself, but he could not regret his words. Deceitful as they were, they were not too unimaginable. He had, after all, always planned to go back to Hertfordshire and gain Elizabeth’s hand in marriage, once Bingley had quickly moved on from her. With everything that was recently said and discovered, he had to expedite that plan; Elizabeth would soon be his betrothed. He could not bear to lose her to his friend.

“What?” whispered Bingley, desolate and pale.

“Who is the man?” asked Miss Bingley. “A tradesman? A clerk? Do

not tell me it is a servant!"

"Most certainly not!" Darcy cleared his throat. "It is a private matter. I have said enough already."

"But how is she engaged? There was no talk of anything at all!" cried Bingley.

"Perhaps the Lucas boy proposed to her. Is she not close friends with his spinster sister?" said Mrs. Hurst.

"I knew he was sweet on her, but –"

"What?" Darcy was taken aback. "*Mr. Lucas?*"

"Yes, but she does not return his feelings, according to his father," said Bingley. "It is not him?"

"It most certainly is not."

"Who is it, then?"

Darcy grimaced. "I am not at the liberty to say. The betrothal is not yet official, and as I have said, it is a private matter. I should not have brought it up at all."

"I do hope it is not a problem of duty to family the gentleman faces, for if he is in your circle, there must be issues with Miss Eliza's lack of dowry," spoke Miss Bingley. "Though your loyalty to your friend leaves us in suspense, I will say that your fascination of Miss Eliza while in Hertfordshire is now well-explained."

Darcy avoided Bingley's questioning gaze.

Bingley finally spoke, "The gentleman is of your acquaintance, then – a lord? Or even a duke? Is it someone I could compete with? Tell me, Darcy, are her feelings engaged to the lucky man?"

"I cannot speak for Miss Elizabeth, but there are great feelings on the gentleman's part, and he is the sort of man her father could never refuse to oblige."

"He loves her?"

"He does."

"And he will not be refused?"

"He will not."

The despair on Bingley's face almost made Darcy wish he could retract everything he had said. He chose, however, to remain silent.

For the rest of the evening, the two friends said and ate very little. They were each caught up in their own racing thoughts, and if not for Mr. Hurst, who always made the effort to finish his plate, the dinner would have ended early.

Back in his own townhouse, Darcy stared at his map of London. His eyes lingered at the area drawn near Cheapside. Rarely did his carriage ever pass through there. How was he to know where Elizabeth was staying? He did not know her aunt and uncle, and doubted that they had any mutual connections. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst might have been privy to the street of their residence, or at the

very least their names, but he did not want them to be suspicious of his actions, else they inform their brother. They and Mr. Hurst were extremely lucky to have seen Elizabeth earlier in the day. Darcy longed to see her himself. He wished for her dark, beautiful eyes to be before him, and to hear her wonderful laughter. Soon, he told himself, he would never be parted from Elizabeth ever again.

With well-concealed disappointment, Elizabeth stood to greet Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst as they were shown into the drawing room in her aunt and uncle's house on Gracechurch street. She did not expect them to return her call so soon – and did they just simper at her?

“My dear Eliza!” said Caroline with uncharacteristic affection. “You need not look so surprised to see us. We *are* intimate friends, are we not?”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “I was unaware.”

“How you make me laugh, Eliza! Why, we all know that you and Jane were the only ladies Louisa and I were fond of in Hertfordshire.”

“I suppose I should be flattered, then,” replied Elizabeth. Her tone, completely unimpressed, did not match her words; nevertheless, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst vigorously nodded in agreement.

“Were you writing a letter just now?” asked Mrs. Hurst. “To dear Jane?”

Elizabeth said that she was.

“You must tell her that we send our affections,” Miss Bingley implored.

So this is what it feels like to be Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth thought, recollecting an eerily similar act by Miss Bingley when they were all at Netherfield. The lady had asked the gentleman to include her regards in his letter to his sister, to what Elizabeth was certain was no avail.

“I will do that,” said Elizabeth, “but I am sure that your sentiments would be more accurately portrayed by your hand than mine.”

Miss Bingley flushed. “Of course we will write to her.”

“We were disappointed when she went away during our last few weeks in Hertfordshire,” added Mrs. Hurst.

“As was I.” Elizabeth glanced at the clock. “I am sorry that Mary and aunt are not present. We had no idea you would call today, so they went to the shops to buy some things in preparation for the wedding.”

“And what wedding are we speaking of?” asked Miss Bingley, sounding as if she knew a great secret.

“My sister's, of course,” answered Elizabeth. She eyed the sisters warily, for they had a strange look to them. “The union between Mary

and Mr. Collins, which you had so generously congratulated during our last meeting, is well-anticipated.”

“You need not be coy, Eliza dear.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“We know of *your* engagement,” said Miss Bingley, moving to sit closer to a bewildered Elizabeth. “Mr. Darcy recently informed us.”

“Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, when he came for dinner, as he often does. You have been sly! We had not a clue that your connections extended beyond Hertfordshire and Gracechurch Street.”

“*Mr. Darcy?*” repeated Elizabeth, blinking rapidly. “You said he spoke of *my* engagement?”

“You must not be upset with him. He must have been too at ease, for he and Charles speak to each other as brothers do. It was very much a slip of his tongue, and once he was aware of what he had said, he would not tell us more.”

“Who is the gentleman?” asked Mrs. Hurst on Elizabeth’s other side. “Is it Mr. Darcy’s cousin, the Viscount?”

“I cannot say.”

“Because you fear of the news travelling more than it ought? You must know you may confide in us, dear Eliza,” said Miss Bingley.

“No, I cannot say because I am not engaged.”

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst looked at each other, then back at Elizabeth.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Hurst. “Are you certain? Mr. Darcy *did* speak of an engagement, and so confidently.”

“He said that the engagement would happen *soon*,” corrected Miss Bingley, realising her mistake. “Well then, you must accept our apologies! When the gentleman proposes, you must act surprised.”

“There is no gentleman,” stated Elizabeth.

“Of course, Eliza.” Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst smiled knowingly, clearly taking Mr. Darcy’s words over Elizabeth’s.

When the ladies finally left, Elizabeth remained astounded. Were Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst creating more mistruths again? They certainly had no qualms telling her that Miss Darcy was their intimate friend and soon-to-be sister. Yet, that lie at least had a purpose. If Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst wanted their brother to believe that Elizabeth was spoken for, as they wanted her to believe of him, it made little sense for them to call on her about her own fake engagement. The more Elizabeth thought about it, the more she figured that they perhaps misunderstood Mr. Darcy. There was a decent enough chance he was speaking of another Elizabeth, common as the name was, and the Bingley sisters assumed that it was she who was engaged.

Engaged! There was no man she wished to be betrothed to. She

simply had not met her life's love yet. Then, her traitorous mind popped up the form of Mr. Darcy. Scoffing at herself, Elizabeth tried to go about the rest of her day without thinking about him, and was met with great failure.

Chapter 9

Bingley sighed for the nth time. Beside him, Darcy frowned, but he was always frowning, so nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Darcy had dragged them to his aunt's ball, with hopes that his friend would find some new angel. Alas, his efforts seemed for naught. The two still stood along the room's walls after their conversation with some important lord had ended twenty minutes ago.

"Why are you not dancing?" asked Darcy.

"I danced earlier."

"Only once. It is unlike you."

"You never dance at all, unless you are bound by propriety to. Why can I not do the same?" defended Bingley. He continued his bouts of sighs.

Annoyed by Bingley's petulance – he had often been annoyed at Bingley as of late, he found – Darcy asked, "What is the matter?"

It was easy for Bingley to spill all. "I have been spoiled by Miss Elizabeth's beauty and wit. After all of our dances together, I have been ruined for any more in my future. No lady matches the way she carries a dance, with so much liveliness yet not an ounce of clumsiness, and with so engaging conversation!" He turned to Darcy. "You had danced with her before, at my ball. You know her brilliance, and should understand how I cannot be satisfied in dancing with other ladies."

"You, who enjoy the activity so much, and for years before meeting Miss Elizabeth, cannot truly mean that."

Bingley sighed again. "I am being a fool."

Darcy did not disagree.

"Miss Elizabeth will never be mine, but I cannot rid her angelic face from my mind."

"Come, Bingley." Darcy had enough. Bingley was ruining both of their potential happiness by not falling in and out of love as was his wont. "I will introduce you to my aunt's niece."

"If you insist."

Bingley ended up dancing with the lady, and afterwards, to Darcy's satisfaction, praised her wholeheartedly.

"She is handsome and clever and accomplished, and she dances with the grace of an angel. I would be a liar if I told you I did not enjoy her company," said Bingley.

“You had spoken too soon forty minutes ago, then. Will you dance a second with her?”

Disappointingly for Darcy, Bingley shook his head. “She reminds me a little of Miss Elizabeth, except there is something missing. Perhaps it is her inclination to speak in instances where Miss Elizabeth would have listened, or the lack of spark in her eye. I had a fine time, but I will allow the other gentlemen to see how wonderful she is. She is in no want for dance partners, anyhow.”

By the end of the evening, Darcy had gotten Bingley to dance twice more, but the results were the same; none measured up to Elizabeth. Darcy knew perfectly well that no other woman compared, but Bingley *had* to find another. Their friendship depended on it.

Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle were, for the most part, sympathetic to her plight from Longbourn. Mrs. Gardiner had in the beginning implored her to think deeply about what a good match Mr. Bingley would make her, but after Elizabeth denied any feelings of affection, the older woman spoke less and less of the gentleman. Mary, too, had ceased talking about Mr. Bingley, although it was less due to respecting Elizabeth’s wishes and more of a matter of conceited distraction by her own upcoming marriage.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst had yet to call on Gracechurch Street again. Elizabeth assumed that the rumour about her was cleared up by Mr. Darcy, and the ladies’ interest in her had ceased. Without an engagement, they may have thought her in danger of attaching herself to their brother, and wanted to disassociate with her. Elizabeth preferred to be without their company, so she was glad of the development.

Her remaining time in London was thus free of drama, up until the day before she was to return to Longbourn. She had accompanied Mrs. Gardiner, Mary, and her cousins on a shopping trip when she saw Mr. Bingley walking on the other side of the street. Alarmed, she took the hands of her little cousins, having been left with them by her aunt and Mary, and hastily entered the nearest shop.

“Lizzy,” said the eldest Gardiner child, peaking outside the shop’s window. “Why are we hiding from that gentleman?”

Elizabeth blushed. “We are not hiding. Come, let us pick out a new bonnet for Mary.”

“But you saw him and ran away,” said the next eldest cousin, refusing to let the subject go as they moved to browse the displays. “I had never seen you so scared, Lizzy, and you are not scared of anything. Except horses.”

“And thunderstorms and big spiders, and playing long songs on the

pianoforte,” added another Gardiner.

“Has Lydia been writing to you?” asked Elizabeth, raising an eyebrow.

“Cousin Lydia never writes, but when we saw her last she told us the story of how you had to sleep with Cousin Jane when it stormed for a week because you were frightened, and how she had to go kill a spider one of those nights for you two, for you are scared of the big ones and Cousin Jane does not like to kill anything. Then, when Cousin Mary began practising the pianoforte, Cousin Lydia said that she wished you would learn how to play longer pieces so everyone would not have to hear Cousin Mary so often.”

Such a speech was met with chastisement from Elizabeth.

“Do you not want to hear what is said about you?” asked the mischievous eldest. “I would want to hear what is said about me. I overheard papa and mama talking about a Mr. Bingley. Are you to marry him, Lizzy? Is he to be our new cousin? Is that why you are avoiding that other gentleman on the street?”

“I am not going to marry Mr. Bingley.”

“Aunt and Uncle Bennet expect you too,” said the second Gardiner child. “Jane told us about him when she was here. She said he was very handsome and kind, and that he lived in that big estate next to Longbourn. She said she hopes you marry him too.”

“I do not care how handsome, kind, and rich Mr. Bingley is. By all means, he is everything a gentleman ought to be, but I will only marry for love,” stated Elizabeth. She picked up a hat she had been eyeing. “Do you think Mary will like this?”

“It is very pretty.”

“I think it suits *you*, Lizzy” said the youngest Gardiner.

A new voice, extremely too deep to belong to any of her cousins, chimed in, “Indeed, it does.”

Elizabeth turned around and nearly dropped the hat. “Mr. Darcy!”

Darcy had been on his way to meet with Bingley when he saw not only his friend, but Elizabeth, looking as beautiful as ever, on the street opposite of each other. How fortunate he was to see her after looking for her for two weeks! Yet she was too close to Bingley; it would not do for him to catch sight of her, approach, and congratulate her on an engagement she was not aware of. He panicked for a bit, until he watched Elizabeth take one glance at Bingley before diving into the nearest store with a group of children. As Bingley did not seem to have noticed either him or Elizabeth, Darcy followed the woman he loved into the store. The conversation he proceeded to hear was astounding! To learn the more intimate details of Elizabeth’s life like her fears of storms, to know that *Elizabeth did not want to marry his friend* – Darcy had never been happier.

“Miss Bennet,” he greeted, taking in her round eyes and lovely blush.

Elizabeth introduced him to her cousins, who had straightened their backs and grown silent. Darcy had never thought much of children beyond Georgiana when she was younger, but he decided that he liked Elizabeth’s small relations, as their candour had revealed most helpful items of importance to him. His focus nevertheless was always on Elizabeth. He eyed the hat she was holding.

“It will suit you charmingly,” said he.

“I am starting to believe that that there is no one it would not suit. It is an exquisite thing.”

Mustering up some confidence, Darcy moved to take the hat and placed it upon Elizabeth’s head, brushing some of her curls away as he did so. His hands flexed once they were back down at his sides, so sensitive they were to the softness of her hair. He leaned back and observed his work. The hat *did* look charming on Elizabeth, who glanced in every direction but his in a rare moment of shyness. “You look lovely.”

“I – I thank you,” spoke Elizabeth. Her hands fiddled with the strings of the hat. “Mary will like this, I believe.”

“No.”

“No?”

“It looks lovely on *you*. I cannot imagine any other wearing it as handsomely as you do,” stated Darcy. “You will have to look for another hat for your sister.”

“Mr. Darcy,” spoke Elizabeth, biting her lower lip. “A few weeks ago, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst called on me. They had heard from you that I was engaged.”

Darcy was shocked; that Bingley’s sisters would approach Elizabeth with such directness was beyond his comprehension. *This is why I abhor deceit*, thought he. Clearing his throat, he tried to explain, “They must have misunderstood. I only said that you might have *soon* been engaged. I may have spoken precipitously.”

“Quite precipitously, sir. One cannot be engaged without a gentleman.”

“There *is* a gentleman, however.”

“That is quite odd, as I have yet to be aware of the man’s existence.” Elizabeth met his eyes, her own teasing, inquisitive, and so very fine. She must have gleamed his feelings, for they widened a fraction. “Mr. Darcy?”

“Miss Bennet, I have been trying to find you since I learned of your arrival in town. I know I could have asked Bingley’s sisters where your uncle’s house was, but I did not want their interference in my actions. In addition, I wished for my friend some time, short as it may have

been, to rid his feelings for you, prior to making my sentiments known. He is, unfortunately, still affected, but I cannot risk the opportunity before me now," he confessed. When Elizabeth continued to stare at him, he took her silence as permission to continue, "You must allow me to call on you."

"You cannot," Elizabeth blurted.

"I beg your pardon?" Pain. Confusion. He demanded an explanation for his refusal.

"It is only that I am leaving tomorrow for Hertfordshire."

True relief had not been known to Darcy until then. "So soon?"

"We had only come to town to shop for Mary's trousseau."

"There was no other reason you came to town? None at all?" Darcy hoped for reaffirmation that Elizabeth had not been chasing after Bingley. It was clear, given what he had eavesdropped earlier, that she did not like his friend *now*, but perhaps she had felt differently, until Bingley had not sought her out when his sisters had. "You must forgive me. I had heard part of your conversation earlier."

"You must forgive us for speaking so about your friend," said Elizabeth. She bit her lip again nervously, and Darcy felt a strong urge to kiss her. "I consider Mr. Bingley a great friend, but nothing more. I have never liked him that way."

"I am glad to hear it. I –" Darcy glanced at the Gardiner children, whom he had almost forgotten was there. He cleared his throat. "Please, do you have any commitments this evening? My aunt and uncle are hosting a dinner party – will you and your family come dine with us? My sister has newly arrived in town and I would like to introduce her to you while you are still here. And there is much I would like to tell you, but this location is not well-suited for the particular conversation."

"I am sorry, Mr. Darcy, but my own aunt and uncle are to attend an important dinner tonight. I am to watch my cousins with Mary."

Darcy was disappointed, but he knew there was little he could do. Having kept Bingley waiting for far too long, he bid Elizabeth goodbye, but not before inquiring where exactly her uncle's house was.

"I will see you soon," said Darcy, taking Elizabeth's hand in his and bestowing on it a kiss. He took his time relishing Elizabeth's uneven breath, and after bowing to the Gardiner children, left the shop.

"Darcy! You have never been so late before. Usually I am the one being scolded by you for a lack of keeping time," said Bingley upon seeing Darcy.

"I apologise. There was an unexpected development in my plans."

"Nothing too troubling, I hope."

"Not at all."

“That is good,” said Bingley. “Now, you wanted my help with finding a pianoforte for your sister?”

His optimism was slowly returning, and Darcy became surer of the fact that Bingley would move on from Elizabeth soon enough. He did not want to risk a regression by revealing his own matrimonial intentions, so he pushed the little guilt he had aside and continued on with his day, all while contemplating Elizabeth, and when he would next see her.

It was late in the evening, and Elizabeth had just tucked the children into bed when a maid informed her that a gentleman was waiting for her in the parlour.

“A gentleman! At this hour?” exclaimed Elizabeth. “My uncle is not home. You should not have let him in.”

The maid explained that she was sorry, that the gentleman was very insistent in wanting to see *Elizabeth*, not Mr. Gardiner, and that she was too scared to turn him away. “He said his name was Mr. Darcy, Miss Lizzy.”

Mr. Darcy! That he would be here, on Gracechurch street, calling on her when the skies were dark! Elizabeth’s heart beat fast. Since their meeting in the millinery shop, she had not been able to go half of a minute without thinking of him, of his words, his gaze, and how gentle he was when he placed the hat upon her head. She had indulged herself and bought that hat; it was currently sitting on her bed, and underneath it was Mr. Darcy’s handkerchief. Perhaps it was too soon to call it love, but she had, only hours ago, finally admitted to herself that she admired him as a lady ought to admire a suitor. She dearly hoped that he felt the same for her, and was inclined to believe that was the case, for few men would have been so insistent to introduce a beloved sister and a plentitude of esteemed relations.

“Miss Lizzy?”

“Does Mary know?” she asked. For, if her sister knew of the meeting, she would admonish Elizabeth for days and tattle the tale to their parents.

The maid shook her head and told her that Mary was reading inside her room.

“Very well. I will see the gentleman, but you must not alert my sister. It would do none of us any good.” Taking a deep breath, Elizabeth straightened her skirts and walked into the room where Mr. Darcy was waiting. The gentleman stopped pacing when he noticed her, and bowed in greeting, after which he stared at her for quite a long moment. Elizabeth was about to call for some tea when Darcy glanced at the maid and, in a tone which left no room for argument,

said, "Leave us."

The maid was evidently shocked, but she did as she was told. Elizabeth was about to chastise Mr. Darcy when he again preceded her speech, moving close to her and staring at her with an intensity that burned her skin. "In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you. I have known my feelings for some time, and so engrossed was I in them that I had failed to notice that my friend thought himself in love with you as well, and that your family had the highest expectations on that matter. I could not bear to see you married to another. I had to have you, and knew it was necessary to guard my friend's heart and draw him away from the country and from you. I would have gone back to you, once his heart had moved on, but your presence in town, and the declaration of his own intentions, changed everything. I was unsure of your own affections, and I could not wait in fear of him seeking you, or even your father, out. I sought you out with him still in love with you, and even with the knowledge that you do not return his feelings, I could not resist making known to you my own desires.

"I admit I tried to resist you from the start, but even knowing that Bingley had feelings for you could not stop the strength of my affections. You are too tempting, Elizabeth, and you have bewitched me, mind, body, and soul. I have fallen in love with you despite our short acquaintance, despite the feelings of my friend, and despite the wishes of my family and your own. Please, end my suffering! Accept my hand in marriage and make me the happiest of men."

Overwhelmed by Mr. Darcy's sentiments, Elizabeth had to sit down. Darcy's nervousness while awaiting her answer was evident, but he was quick and eager to assist her in finding comfort. She was touched by his care, and finally, after a short amount of time where her ears heard nothing but the pounding of her own heart, spoke, "I am greatly flattered by your words and offer. I do not know what to say, for I admire you, Mr. Darcy, but as you said – our acquaintance has been of a short duration, and I cannot yet confidently return your love."

Her words were laced in regret, and Darcy would not have that. "Say that you will marry me," he pleaded. "Say that you will open your heart to me, that you will not mind me showing my heart to you. Dare I hope, Elizabeth, that you are already on the way to loving me?"

"You may," answered Elizabeth. So great were her emotions that tears formed in her eyes. "Mr. Darcy, I do not want to come in between you and your closest friend."

"You will not," stated Darcy with no uncertainty. "You have done nothing to raise his expectations. I saw you hide from him just earlier today! I confess that I had the knowledge that he wanted to propose to

you, and that I had deterred him from doing so, convinced that his felicity would not lie with you, and convinced that we were meant to be together. I have seen Bingley fall in and out of love many times before, and did think that he had thought himself more truly in love with you than any other in his past, but I believe that given time, he would be able to move on and fall in love again. Any breach with Bingley would be by my doing, not yours, and though I would not wish to have to choose between either of you, if such a circumstance arose, I would choose you. You are the most important being in the world to me, Elizabeth.”

He wiped away her tears.

“I have always wanted to marry for love,” said Elizabeth, taking Mr. Darcy’s hand. It was so large compared to her own. “I think I will be able to do that, by marrying you.”

Darcy’s eyes brightened. “Truly, Elizabeth? You will marry me?”

“Yes. Yes, I will marry you, Mr. Darcy! If you could trust me to fall in love with you.”

Darcy’s smile was so big and bright that Elizabeth thought he looked like an entirely different, though still incredibly handsome, man. Elizabeth smiled back at him and laughed, raising his hand to her lips.

So enthused was Darcy by the action that he caressed Elizabeth’s face and, seeking permission through her eyes, slowly placed his lips upon hers. Wanting to see her reaction, he pulled back, and was satisfied to see the shy smile and blush on her pretty face. Nevertheless, he wished to hear aloud her approval of him. “Was that tolerable?”

“Tolerable?” Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Only tolerable?”

“I suppose so. I have experienced no other kisses to compare them to, except those from my family, but those do not truly count.”

“Neither have I, but even with nothing to compare to, I know that our kiss was breathtaking.”

The appreciation in Elizabeth’s dark eyes and the large smile she bestowed on him was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. She was incredibly lovely, and he could not help, as a man violently in love, but lean in for another kiss. Elizabeth returned it with matching eagerness, and the two of them explored the pleasures of a passionate kiss.

They were thus entwined when Mr. Gardiner and Mrs. Gardiner entered the room. Mr. Darcy was promptly pulled by his collar away from Elizabeth and violently pushed to the floor.

“Uncle!” cried Elizabeth, running to separate the two. “Stop!”

“Go with your aunt, Lizzy,” directed Mr. Gardiner. Mrs. Gardiner

placed an arm on Elizabeth's shoulder, trying to get her away from the fuss.

"What is going on? Why is Mr. Darcy here?" asked Mary, newly arrived and squinting at the floor. When she looked at Elizabeth for answers, she frowned at her ruffled state. Her eyes darted suspiciously back and forth between Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy, and the angry Mr. Gardiner.

Sensing that Elizabeth would not be moved, Mrs. Gardiner attended to her other niece, escorting Mary back to her room.

"Please stop, Uncle Gardiner! I have never known you to be so violent," Elizabeth pleaded once again.

"And I have never known you to be so generous in bestowing favors to men!"

"He is my betrothed!"

"What in the world? You have no betrothed!"

With Mr. Gardiner briefly distracted, Mr. Darcy was able to shake him off without injuring any of them. He moved a distance away from the enraged man, with Elizabeth following and checking his hands and neck for any damage. Despite the undesirability of the unfortunate first impression he formed with his future uncle-in-law, Darcy was could not help but be pleased. He had dreamt of being cared for by Elizabeth since she had walked three miles to nurse her sick sister at Netherfield, and was not disappointed by its realisation, to say nothing of her acceptance of him, and their kisses.

"Elizabeth Bennet, you and this young man must explain yourselves!" demanded Mr. Gardiner.

"I am Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire, sir. Perhaps we can move this discussion into your study?" said Darcy. His tone was as haughty as it had been in Hertfordshire, and Mr. Gardiner did not appear impressed.

"Please, uncle. You want an explanation, and Mr. Darcy is more than willing to offer one," spoke Elizabeth. "If you prefer to speak with me alone first, then I will be happy to."

"I will speak to him alone," said Mr. Gardiner.

"Uncle –"

"Let them, Lizzy," said Mrs. Gardiner, reentering the room. To her husband, she whispered, "I will care for Lizzy. Do not be too harsh on the gentleman."

"He is certainly no gentleman," replied Mr. Gardiner, not making sure to be quiet at all.

"Go, my dear."

As the men left the room, Darcy threw a lingering look at Elizabeth, who gave him a sympathetic smile of encouragement.

"Lizzy," said Mrs. Gardiner the moment they heard the door to the

study close, “are you truly engaged to Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth nodded. “I am. He asked me before you arrived.”

“Then I must be glad of the fact, for the sight I witnessed nearly had me calling for salts.” Mrs. Gardiner crossed her arms. “I have never been so disappointed in you, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth had the decency to be ashamed. “I know I should not have acted with so little propriety, but he had proposed to me and our feelings could not be contained. We have never kissed before, I assure you.”

“Did you know he was coming?”

“Not at all.”

Mrs. Gardiner narrowed her eyes.

“Truly, I did not,” said Elizabeth.

“The children told me all about your meeting with a Mr. Darcy earlier today. I would have spoken to you, but you did not bring up the event yourself.”

“You were so busy with Mary and then your dinner, and it would not have been a short conversation.”

“No, it would not have been.” Mrs. Gardiner sighed. “Your engagement alone with Mr. Darcy would have taken everyone by surprise, but we find the two of you here, in a room alone, at a late hour, embracing. Then there is the fact that Mr. Darcy is the supposed best friend of Mr. Bingley.”

“Aunt, I know not what you are implying.”

“I am only concerned for you, Lizzy. From what your uncle has heard from your father, Mr. Bingley is the better gentleman, even if he is not as rich as his friend.”

“I assure you, that if Mr. Bingley is everything a *gentleman* ought to be, Mr. Darcy is everything a *man* ought to be,” said Elizabeth. “I have a chance at *love* with Mr. Darcy, aunt, and I would be so happy to have your support.”

Mrs. Gardiner could not deny such a plea from her favourite niece. “If that is the case, then I will support you. However, you must see that I will need to observe your Mr. Darcy more before I can form a good opinion on his character. I recall that Pemberley is a beautiful estate, and that he is a grandson of an earl, but what I have witnessed today and heard from your family places him at a disadvantage.”

“You will see, aunt, that Mr. Darcy greatly improves on acquaintance.”

“I hope, for your sake, that he does.”

Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Darcy left the study after an hour of interrogation. The latter immediately went to stand near his future bride. The former was considerably less outraged than before, although he did not lack skepticism by the way an eye of his always

remained on Darcy.

“I must leave now, Elizabeth, but I will go to Longbourn on the morrow,” said Darcy, bringing her hands to his lips.

Elizabeth was elated. “You will come with us?”

Darcy nodded, and to Mr. Gardiner’s displeasure, kissed Elizabeth’s hand again.

“I will bring the settlement papers for your father,” continued Darcy. “You may look over them in the morning, if you would like.”

“Why, you are very efficient, Mr. Darcy, and quite confident, to have the papers prepared,” teased Elizabeth. It was barely noticeable, but Mr. Darcy’s ears turned pink.

Chapter 10

The next morning, Elizabeth was met with inquiries from Mary about the previous night. Elizabeth told her about her engagement to Mr. Darcy, and to her surprise, Mary was not the slightest bit delighted for her.

"You should not have dallied with Mr. Bingley only to marry Mr. Darcy. It is unvirtuous, and does not reflect well on our family," lectured Mary, her nose high in the air.

"I did not dally with Mr. Bingley!" cried Elizabeth.

"You need not marry Mr. Darcy if you do not want to, Lizzy. If he had put you in a compromising position by calling late at night, when our aunt and uncle were not home, you must not feel obliged to him. I will marry Mr. Collins soon, and he will take care of our family," continued Mary. "Although, you should have never received Mr. Darcy alone in the first place."

"Mr. Darcy did not put me in a compromising position."

Mr. Gardiner mumbled something that sounded like a disagreement.

"He must have, or else he would not have proposed marriage to you. Mr. Collins had informed me that he was to marry his cousin, Miss Anne de Bourgh, the daughter of the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and heiress to the great Rosings estate."

This was the first Elizabeth had heard of this, and she refused to believe such a thing. Before she could defend Mr. Darcy's honour, however, the man himself was shown into the room and immediately spoke, having heard part of the conversation from the hallway.

"I have never been engaged to my cousin. It may have been a wish of my aunt's, but she has never directly spoken about it to me, and if she had, I never would have been inclined to satisfy it, duty to my family or not. Mr. Collins, I am afraid, is spreading incredibly false rumours that will only cause himself, my aunt, and my cousin detriment, for Elizabeth is the only lady I have ever considered making Mrs. Darcy."

Elizabeth smiled at her betrothed while Mary turned red in embarrassment. Mrs. Gardiner was glad that Mr. Darcy was not spoken for, and even Mr. Gardiner could not help but approve of how well Mr. Darcy had defended Elizabeth.

Before the party was off to Hertfordshire, Elizabeth and Darcy were able to snag a brief moment alone together.

"I am satisfied," said Darcy, smiling, "that you are wearing the hat from yesterday."

"You had flattered me so much that I could not have left the shop without it."

"It compliments your features."

"The blue matches *your* eyes."

"Is that why you chose it?"

"Do not appear so prideful, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth's laughter entwined with that of the children in the background. "It is kind of you to offer your carriages. My young cousins have never been so excited for a long ride."

"You do not think it too long, I hope. Derbyshire is a three-day journey."

"Three days! I do not think I have ever travelled so far a distance."

"You will get used to it, I am sure. And if you do not, we can simply live the rest of our days at Pemberley." Glancing around and finding no one looking their way, Darcy bent down and gave Elizabeth a quick kiss. He handed her a letter, as well as some documents pertaining to her marriage settlement. "For you to read on the ride."

A little dazed, Elizabeth tried to compose herself. "Why, you will be right across from me in the carriage!"

"There are things I would want to say to you, but cannot, either due to my inability to converse well or, more likely, your uncle's presence."

Mr. Gardiner had been oddly insistent that he ride in the same carriage as Darcy and Elizabeth. Then, as if he had heard his being mentioned, he called Elizabeth to start ascending into the coach.

Spacious as the Darcy carriage was, Darcy's legs were long, and Elizabeth started when they brushed against her own. She looked up to catch him staring, the ghost of playful contentment visible on his otherwise staid countenance. Pointedly, Darcy turned to make conversation with her uncle as if he did not fluster her with his touch. Deciding that he was not to be left unteased, Elizabeth shifted so her slipper grazed his ankle. Darcy froze for a second, and his speech nearly faltered, but he quickly composed himself. He frequently glanced at their interwoven legs, however, and Elizabeth knew that he was not as collected as he looked.

By the time they crossed into the bounds of Hertfordshire, Mr. Darcy had somehow won Mr. Gardiner's approval, and through conversation, no less. Elizabeth was astounded. The men both apparently enjoyed fishing, and had bonded over that, as well their love for Elizabeth. As impressed as she was by the new-found good nature of her fiancé, and she was *very* impressed, she was distracted the papers in her hands. Her marriage settlement was far more

generous than she could have hoped had she married a duke, but most of all, Darcy's private letter to her was an awakening. She remembered how they had once debated whether poetry was the food of love. Well, if the verses were written by Mr. Darcy, they certainly were. Never before had she been so affected by ink on paper. Her love for Mr. Darcy must have already been growing stout, as she found herself spending far too much time trailing her finger over Mr. Darcy's loving adieu and signature, imagining their blissful future together.

"Fitzwilliam," spoke Elizabeth. Darcy looked at her first in shock, then in utter happiness as he heard his given name spill from her lips. His charming dimples were on full display, and Elizabeth wished to kiss them. But she could not, as they had an audience. Mr. Gardiner may have seen them embrace before, and he might have warmed up to Darcy some on the ride, but the idea posed too much risk. Instead, she asked, "How long will you stay in Hertfordshire?"

"For as long as our engagement, of course."

"Then he shall immediately whisk you away to Derbyshire!" said a jovial Mr. Gardiner. He glanced out the carriage. "I see my sister's family is surprised that we came in such grandness."

Indeed, Mrs. Bennet and her two youngest daughters could be heard loudly exclaiming their wonder at the unfamiliar carriages pulling up to Longbourn. Elizabeth and Darcy grimaced as they thought they heard them mention Bingley. The ladies were certainly surprised when Darcy appeared out of a carriage, handing Elizabeth down, with no Bingley in sight.

"Mr. Darcy! Is your dear friend Mr. Bingley planning on reopening Netherfield?" asked Mrs. Bennet after fussing over Elizabeth and Mary.

"I do not know, ma'am," said Darcy in a tone that relayed that he *did* know, and that the answer was unfavourable.

"What is he doing here, then?" Lydia loudly whispered to Kitty.

"Perhaps he came with word of Mr. Bingley."

Ignoring them, Darcy sought out Mr. Bennet, who after only briefly glimpsing that his daughters had made it home safely, was promptly returning indoors. After gaining a reassuring smile from Elizabeth, Darcy followed the patron.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth sought out Jane, and taking her away from the others, immediately told her of her engagement.

"Oh, no, Lizzy! What of Mr. Bingley?" cried Jane.

Elizabeth blinked. That was not the reaction she had expected from her constantly kind, optimistic sister. "Jane, you know that I never admired Mr. Bingley enough to want to become his wife."

"I was sure that he was completely in love with you! What happened when you went to town? Did you see him there?"

“He never saw me.”

“Did you avoid him?”

“Not intentionally, for the most part.”

“But how did he not see you if you came to be engaged to Mr. Darcy? Does Mr. Bingley know about your engagement?”

“I do not believe so.”

“Poor Mr. Bingley!” Tears actually started forming in Jane’s eyes. “How can you break his heart? And I had thought Mr. Darcy was a good friend to him.”

“Jane,” said Elizabeth, frowning. “You always think well of everyone. I do not enjoy hearing you disparaging Mr. Darcy so.”

“It is only that I believed you so compatible with Mr. Bingley. You are both so radiant people, and he would have treated you like royalty. Are you really engaged to Mr. Darcy? You are not jesting?”

“Yes, I am engaged. If you do not believe me, then I fear no one will.”

“Will you truly be happy with Mr. Darcy? Are you sure that this is what you want?”

“I am sure that I want to marry Mr. Darcy, and I am exceedingly happy. Though I will be happier still if I had your blessing.”

When Jane could not answer her, Elizabeth’s heart dropped.

“Jane?”

“I am sorry, Lizzy. It is just, Mr. Bingley...”

Elizabeth had never felt so betrayed.

“Lizzy? Are you well?” Jane asked timidly.

“It is only a slight headache.”

Jane looked on concernedly. “Lizzy.”

“You cannot expect me to be pleased that you cannot be happy for me.”

“I am sure I will come to see your side of it soon.”

“But what of the present?”

“You must understand that we had hopes of Mr. Bingley for you. He was so kind, and so good-humoured.”

“You, and mama, and papa had hopes for Mr. Bingley. I never did,” said Elizabeth. “Why can you not think of *my* feelings?”

“Oh, Lizzy, I am truly sorry. I only ask for time to comprehend everything that is happening.”

Elizabeth was saved from responding when Mrs. Bennet, Kitty, and Lydia came over asking about her stay in town. Mostly, they asked about Mr. Bingley, and were all scandalized when they heard that the two never crossed paths.

“But whatever is Mr. Darcy doing here, then?” cried Mrs. Bennet. “What purpose does he have at Longbourn, without Mr. Bingley?”

“Sister,” called Mr. Gardiner, “your goddaughter would like to see

her friend again, a Miss Robinson, and was wondering if you could have someone send a note."

"Robinson? Why, they are not the greatest of families to associate with in the neighbourhood! Just last week, their son was found to be —"

Mrs. Bennet bounced to the other side of the room, her youngest daughters following, for they had interesting gossip that must be shared as well. Elizabeth silently thanked her uncle for intervening.

Jane knew her sister well enough to not say anything about Mr. Bingley further, and Elizabeth was allowed a moment to herself in peace. As each minute passed without the sight of Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth's anxiousness grew, until finally, she could bear it no longer and went to wait outside her father's study. She must have paced for over half of an hour when Mr. Darcy hurriedly opened the door, stopping in his tracks when he spied her. He appeared surprised but happy.

"Your father wants to speak with you," he said gently. Elizabeth gave him a comforting smile before entering the study, for it looked like he needed it.

"Are you out of your senses, Lizzy?" asked Mr. Bennet once the door shut.

Elizabeth stiffened. "Papa, I know it may seem unexpected, but my feelings for Mr. Darcy has grown considerably."

"For heaven's sake, from what I discerned from the man, you did not see him more than you did Mr. Bingley's sisters while you were in town! How is it possible that you have come to like him enough to accept his proposal?"

"Our feelings had already started growing in Hertfordshire," countered Elizabeth.

"I knew nothing of it."

"That does not negate its existence."

"I would have appreciated a single comment, at the very least, from you. From him, I would have appreciated a call weeks ago. I suppose the amount he is settling on you is to make up for that. Though he may impress *you* with his income, I fear I am more difficult to please."

"I did not accept him for his wealth, papa. I had thought you knew me better." Elizabeth let out a deep breath. "Do you object to our marriage? Did you refuse your consent?"

"I did not," Mr. Bennet said gravely. "Mr. Darcy is not the sort of man I would dare refuse anything, should he ask. However, my consent is not my blessing."

"Whatever do you mean?" As Elizabeth demanded an explanation, her heart sank for the second time that day. She did not know how she would be able to bear her disappointment with both Jane and her

father.

Mr. Bennet explained, "Since his entering the neighbourhood, he has shown our society nothing but disapproval and contempt. He admitted to me himself that he does not rejoice in the *inferior* society here, including the standing and behaviour of our own family."

"You must have provoked him for him to use such terms. He is prideful, yes, and uneasy in company he is not used to, but he does not look down on people simply because they are not of his circles. You did not see how well he gets along with my aunt and uncle."

"There is no surplus of respect *there*, when he comes to their home uninvited in the middle of the night to make advances on you. Yes, he shared to me how he proposed, though I reckon it was only to force my consent." Mr. Bennet grimaced. "If it were only that, Elizabeth. He betrays his closest friend by proposing to you. Mr. Darcy did not deny that Mr. Bingley was unaware of your being in London; had Mr. Bingley known, you may be marrying a different man."

"It does not matter whether Mr. Bingley knew I was in London or not. I would never have accepted a proposal from him."

"Mr. Darcy did not allow his friend the chance to further his acquaintance with you. You may have grown to love Bingley over his friend."

"Papa, there was never a chance that my feelings for Mr. Bingley would have evolved into something more than friendship," Elizabeth adamantly stated. "And I do not think that Mr. Bingley's feelings are as strong as everyone believes them to be. Netherfield is as closed as it was all those weeks ago, and Longbourn has received nary a note excepting Miss Bingley's delightful farewell."

"Mr. Darcy informed me that Mr. Bingley believed you to be engaged. The man was honourable enough to step aside."

"A man in love would have fought farther," argued Elizabeth, "and I am glad Mr. Bingley did not."

"You are merely saying things now, Lizzy. We both know that a gentleman would not interfere, and on the other case, a gentleman most certainly would not spread lies about engagements."

"Mr. Darcy might have been precipitate in my acceptance of him, but he was correct that if I were to be engaged, it would never to be to Mr. Bingley. I knew Mr. Bingley well enough in Hertfordshire to know that I would never be happy as his wife. How many times must I repeat that?"

"So you do not even sympathize with a man who will be heartbroken over the meddling of his sisters and his friend? You will choose a man who unapologetically and selfishly takes action to get his own way? Granted, he is richer, but wealth is never a substitute for amiability."

"If I have caused Mr. Bingley pain, then I am sorry, but I cannot regret my choice. Mr. Darcy may have his faults, but his are no greater than any other true gentleman, and I have no doubt that he will be the best of husbands. Mr. Darcy is a good man, and he has my heart." The sincerity in Elizabeth's voice did not go unnoticed by either of them. Yet, while Elizabeth was growing more certain of her love towards Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bennet could not comprehend her choosing so serious a man over the lively, good-humoured Bingley, and was more inclined to believe that his daughter was deluding herself.

"Very well. You have made your point, and although I have not given you my blessing, you have nonetheless my consent. Now, you may run along to your wealthy betrothed, Lizzy."

Elizabeth left the study angry. She calmed a little when she saw Darcy waiting for her in the hallway, yet she could not hide her lingering distraught, and after ignoring propriety by taking Darcy out to the gardens alone, was promptly questioned.

"Elizabeth," said Darcy, caressing her tears away, "what did your father say to you?"

"It is almost too embarrassing to say."

"He gave me his consent, although he seemed reluctant to do so. Did he withdraw it?"

"No, but he did not give us his blessing."

"Oh, Elizabeth." Darcy glanced around, and seeing that they were alone, hugged her against him. "Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, you deserve so much more than that. Did he say why he did not give it?"

Elizabeth sighed, feeling safe and warm in Darcy's arms. "I believe it has to do with his affection for Mr. Bingley, though your sharing what had happened the night you proposed did not help."

"Bingley!"

"My father is oddly fond of him. I have never seen him so interested in a neighbour. Jane, too, did not say anything when I asked for her blessing. *She* seems oddly fond of Mr. Bingley as well, but I never thought that my dearest sister would not be happy for me, especially when she is happy for Mary, who is marrying *Mr. Collins!* Oh, what I would do to turn back time and refuse every dance with Mr. Bingley!"

"I hope you would not think such a thing. If you had refused dancing with him, you would have been forced to sit out all the rest of your dances, including any that involved myself."

"We only danced once, and we had barely spoken during it."

"And I had never enjoyed a dance more." Darcy stroke Elizabeth's back. "Truly, I should have been more open in my regard for you. I should have taken every opportunity to know your father better, as Bingley had done."

"I do hope that your relationship with Mr. Bingley will be

unaffected, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said quietly.

“Enough of that.”

Elizabeth looked up to find Mr. Darcy staring down at her more intensely than he ever had before. She might have mistaken his gaze for anger, if she did not witness his passion for her yesterday.

“Enough of what?”

“You addressed me as Mr. Darcy. You have called me by my given name before. Will you not continue to do so?”

“Oh.” Elizabeth bit her lip, her eyes teasing. “Perhaps I shall only call you Fitzwilliam on special occasions, and on the most special of them all, call you Fitz or Will.”

“Elizabeth.”

“Will you not call me Lizzy? Or even Eliza? Maybe Beth? Not many have ever called me that.”

“I admit I am most impatient to call you Mrs. Darcy.”

“I think, Fitzwilliam, my Mr. Darcy, that I shall be very happy as Mrs. Darcy.” Elizabeth smiled, and Darcy bent down to kiss her.

Chapter 11

Mr. Darcy met Mrs. Bennet's expectations by announcing that, now that he had Mr. Bennet's consent, he would be able to speedily procure a special licence. Mrs. Bennet had, after overcoming her shock at Elizabeth's engagement, easily thrown over any bias for Mr. Bingley in favor of the richer man. Her exclamations on Elizabeth's good fortune may have been completely uncouth, but she was mostly excused by the couple, who oddly appreciated her blessings after Mr. Bennet, Jane, and even Mary – who was still of the mind that Lady Catherine's wishes should be followed – failed to give theirs. Elizabeth's other sisters were more neutral in their reactions. Lydia thought that the entire ordeal was funny. That Elizabeth was marrying her former admirer's best friend, who was the most serious, miserable gentleman in all of England, made Lydia giggle every time she passed by her sister. She was quite excited for Elizabeth to wed him, however, because the man was extremely rich, which could only mean good things for her. Thus, she made it very clear to Elizabeth that she approved of her upcoming marriage. Whatever Lydia thought, Kitty often thought the same, so she, too, congratulated Elizabeth.

With the notion of a special licence, Darcy and Elizabeth had an array of wedding dates to choose from, particularly those in the near future. When the discussion of a double wedding with Mr. Collins and Mary was brought up, he was adamant that he and Elizabeth would not share the same date as them, no matter how convenient the nuptials would have been planned. He certainly did not want to be married alongside an oaf like Mr. Collins, so he asked Elizabeth if she wanted to have their wedding before or after her sister's. He hoped that she would choose the earlier date, and was very pleased when she did just that. They were to have their wedding the day after Christmas.

"I did not think that I would want our wedding to take place so soon," said Elizabeth, "but my father has been exasperatedly passive aggressive, as well as Jane, and my mother has been growing more exuberant by the hour. Mary is angry at me for becoming engaged to Lady Catherine's nephew, and Kitty and Lydia are always asking for new ribbons and dresses. And if I am truly being honest, I would like to be wed before Mr. Collins returns from his business in Kent."

Darcy was ecstatic that they would marry so soon, but hated that

she was pained by her family. Having stayed at Longbourn the past two days, he knew all too well what Elizabeth had been speaking of, and could not help but resent Mr. Bennet and his eldest child. Elizabeth had given Mr. Bennet and Jane her love, and they repaid her by their own selfish feelings. He could not wait to bring Elizabeth to his home where she belonged, and where she would be respected by all.

Elizabeth's friends and family, save for the Gardiners, were one of the most indecorous circles of the gentry Darcy had ever observed, and he did not believe that they deserved her. Elizabeth, thankfully, was ready to act as a buffer between him and every silly person who dared approach. She always stood near him, and even if he could not touch her, her presence comforted him. Darcy had never thought he could be obsessed with a scent, but there he was, always trying to lean close to Elizabeth to catch a hint of florals, sweetness, and something uniquely *Elizabeth*. Fortunately, with the Gardiners in residence and the room given to Mr. Collins not aired out enough to rid of the odour of the man, Darcy was given Elizabeth's room while she shared a bed with her elder sister. Elizabeth's bed especially smelled of her, and Darcy found himself sniffing her pillow often and going to sleep with a smile on his face, anticipating the night when Elizabeth herself could lie beside him.

Darcy and Elizabeth were to go back to town together for a few days, the former to retrieve the special licence, and the latter to gather items for her trousseau and meet Miss Darcy. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were to accompany them, leaving their children at Longbourn to be doted on.

"Are you missing something?" Darcy asked Elizabeth the morning they were to quit Hertfordshire.

"Oh, it is only something small," said Elizabeth. Her eyes darted frantically around the room, and her figure followed their trace.

"You overexert yourself." Darcy strode to her side, holding out a handkerchief. "Here."

"Thank you – oh!" Elizabeth grazed her fingers over the embroidery on the familiar cloth she was given. She stared accusingly at Darcy. "However did you find this?"

"It is mine."

"You refused to take it back some time ago, I recall. Unless your sister is in the habit of embroidering you identical handkerchiefs, you are quite the snoop and thief, for I am sure I knew exactly where it was in my room!"

"If you knew where I found it, you did not need to ask me. Nor did you need to search every corner of this particular room," said Darcy. "Do not be embarrassed that you treasure such a thing. I am very

pleased that you have kept it, as I am pleased that you kept the hat at the milliner's for yourself instead of gifting it to your sister. Although I must say, I am most *displeased* to find another man's handkerchief in your drawer. Who is C.L.?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, you do not need to be jealous of my dear friend Charlotte Lucas, though it does serve you right for going through my things. She was teasing when she gifted that to me years ago."

"I was only looking for a token for myself."

"And did you find one?"

Darcy bent down to kiss Elizabeth, and as he did so, he slipped the glove off her left hand. Satisfied, he carefully folded the glove and put it away for safekeeping in his pocket. "I did now."

"La! Did you see, Kitty? Stuffy old Mr. Darcy kissed Lizzy!" cried a voice from the house that sounded very much like Lydia.

A voice discerned as Kitty's replied, "I do not believe you!"

"I saw it with my own very eyes! And Lizzy is always telling us not to flirt so much with the officers. La, what a hypocrite she is!"

"They are to be married soon, Lydia. Lizzy may give one or two liberties, and still remain a perfect lady," said a voice that must have belonged to Jane.

"A lady should do everything to protect her virtue. It is indecorous for even one kiss to be shared, and unthinkable for it to occur in so public a setting." That voice, without a doubt, was Mary's.

Elizabeth turned red from annoyance and embarrassment. Darcy thought the anger in her eyes very becoming.

"I think you will like Georgiana, my love. She is a little quieter than your own sisters," said Darcy.

"I am excited to meet her. I only hope that she will approve of me."

"She already does."

"Without a single meeting between us? I am frightened that you have done me ill and exaggerated all of my good qualities in your letters to her."

"I have exaggerated nothing. Everything I have told her about you is the absolute truth, from your beauty to your wit, and to your talent at the pianoforte."

"She will be sorely disappointed when she sees how blind you have been."

"On the contrary, Elizabeth, my eyesight is impeccable. I can see your cheeks redden despite the great distance created by our disparity in heights. You enjoy my compliments, I am sure of it."

"You may have no qualms being vain yourself, but I at least try think humbly of my person."

Darcy smiled. Elizabeth was the only one who could speak to him

so; in fact, he enjoyed her teasing.

They arrived in town unscathed, and upon entering Darcy House, Elizabeth was introduced to Miss Georgiana Darcy. Miss Darcy was tall, and although she was fair, there was a clear resemblance to her brother. As Darcy had said, she was very shy, but sweet, and very eager to meet Elizabeth. Her conversation at the beginning was slightly timid, but little by little Elizabeth, Mrs. Gardiner, and Miss Darcy's companion, Mrs. Annesley, were able to draw some longer responses from her. It mattered not that Miss Darcy was a bit shy anyhow; she and Elizabeth were thoroughly charmed by each other, and they and Darcy could not be happier.

While Darcy was to deal with the special licence the next day, the ladies went to visit the shops. Elizabeth was introduced to the modiste Miss Darcy frequented, and proceeded to be entirely bombarded with pins and measuring tapes and what must have been dozens, if not hundreds, of fabrics. With Miss Darcy beside her, and especially after being introduced as Mr. Darcy's betrothed, Elizabeth was treated like royalty.

"Miss Darcy, would you model this ribbon for me? Your hair is more similar to my elder sister's than mine is," said Elizabeth after she was done being poked with a thousand pins.

As she obliged her, Miss Darcy noticed a melancholy in Elizabeth. "Is something wrong, Miss Bennet?"

"I would hate to burden you with my petty woes."

"It is no burden at all," Miss Darcy replied. She sounded almost eager, which was to be expected of a lady who never had sisters or close friends to share confidences with.

Elizabeth smiled. "I am only thinking about Jane. I will miss her when I leave my parents' home, but lately, she has been so different. She has always been my dearest sister, but I cannot seem to speak with her as openly as before. Your brother is lucky to have you, for I know your support means the world to him; it means a great deal to me as well. That you are willing to accept me, an inconsequential country girl, into your family – I cannot be more appreciative."

"Oh, Elizabeth! I am so sorry about your sister. If you ever need someone to talk to – well, that is – it is only that I – my brother says that I am a great listener," said Miss Darcy. She blushed. "Oh, forgive me, Miss Bennet. My brother has often spoken and written about you as Elizabeth."

Elizabeth laughed. "If we are to be sisters, you must call me whatever you wish. My own sisters call me Lizzy, and some of my friends call me Eliza. As for your offer, I will certainly accept it, notably when your brother vexes me in the future. Of course, you may speak freely with me as well, especially whenever Fitzwilliam vexes

you!”

Miss Darcy was surprised to hear her brother spoken of in jest, but nonetheless incredibly excited about the development in her relationship with her brother's betrothed, and implored Elizabeth to call her Georgiana. Elizabeth was everything the young lady had ever wanted in a sister, and she later told her brother as much.

“I am glad. I had always thought that you two would get on perfectly,” said Darcy, looking as proud as ever.

“Lizzy plays as wonderfully as you said. I was surprised to hear that she did not have a master. Her voice is especially lovely,” continued Georgiana.

“Yes, there is emotion in her voice that is rare to hear. It would be lovely to hear her sing alongside you on the pianoforte.”

“We had been practicing several duets earlier.”

“Excellent. And how was the trip to the dressmaker? Was Elizabeth pleased with the service?”

“Yes, the modiste was very complimentary towards Lizzy, and commented on her beauty every other minute. Lizzy was very flattered; it was almost as if she did not know how handsome she was!”

“She is certainly the most handsome lady of my acquaintance.”

“I wish I had eyes like hers.”

“Her eyes are fine indeed, but yours are beautiful as well; they are much like our mother's.”

Georgiana smiled. “I wish mother and father were here to meet Lizzy.”

“They would have loved her.” Perhaps they would have questioned Elizabeth's origins at first, but her liveliness would have won over the old Mr. Darcy, and her grace would have won over Lady Anne.

“You will give Lizzy mother's ring?”

“Yes, did you get her measurement?”

Georgiana nodded. “Her hands are quite small. It may need to be resized.”

“I will drop it at the jeweler first thing in the morning then.”

“She will love it, I am sure.” The Darcy siblings, known for their somber faces, beamed at each other.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth was having an equally pleasant conversation with her aunt and uncle, whose opinion of Darcy had solidified with significantly improvement.

“Your Mr. Darcy is a pleasant fellow. I admit that I was initially not keen on him, given the first impression he made, but he has since proven himself a most respectable gentleman,” spoke Mrs. Gardiner.

“I ought to run him through for his actions the evening of his proposal – what was he thinking, calling so late at night? Surely, he

knew that your aunt and I would not be there, that clever, foolish man.” Mr. Gardiner laughed. “However, he is a man violently in love. I admire his passion. I have also done some research on his estate, in addition to what he has told me about it. Pemberley seems to have a large lake, and I was granted permission to visit and fish any time I wanted. I could even appear uninvited, he said – surely to make amends of *his* uninvited entrance in my home, but I am nonetheless delighted with his offer.”

“I am glad you approve of him,” said Elizabeth. “If only papa could warm up to Mr. Darcy so easily.”

“I am sure he will someday. You are his favorite, and he had hoped to have you near him for as long as he lived. I believe he is simply sad that Darcy is whisking you so far away. It is a great distance between Derbyshire and Hertfordshire.”

“It still does not explain why he does not give us his blessing.”

“He knows how Mr. Darcy proposed to you, dearest. No matter how much of a gentleman Mr. Darcy is, a father is bound to be upset after receiving such news,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “Mr. Darcy also should have approached your father first in Hertfordshire before acting on his designs on you.”

Elizabeth sighed. “If only papa could witness how good of a man Mr. Darcy is. Remember, as we toured his townhouse, how complimentary the housekeeper was towards him? That the servants would have such genuine, high praise for him – and then when he returned from his business, he took over the tour himself, and was so charming and pleasant! His manners are usually stilted in company, but for you and uncle, I am glad that he has become warm and welcoming. The care he gives to his home is evident, and he has done a fine job being the guardian of his sister, who looks up to him very much. She believes him to be the best of brothers, and from what I have seen and heard, she is completely correct. Mr. Darcy, I am sure, will be the best of husbands as well, and he would no doubt be a wonderful father one day.”

“I am glad to see you so in love, Lizzy, and to such a great man,” said Mrs. Gardiner, smiling alongside her husband.

“I have never been so happy,” declared Elizabeth. “To be in love with Mr. Darcy – it is the most wonderful feeling in the world.”

Oh, Elizabeth thought to herself later while she was abed, I am in love with Mr. Darcy.

Upon realising that she was not merely *falling in* love, but indeed *in* love with Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, Elizabeth wished to tell the man as soon as possible. Unfortunately, it was night, and while she would have liked to surprise her betrothed with a confession at such an hour as he did her, she simply did not have the means to. Instead, she woke

up incredibly early in the morning, and sent a note to Darcy House. When the messenger returned, so did Darcy, and the couple found themselves alone in the same room where he had first declared his love for Elizabeth.

“You came,” said Elizabeth smiling up at him.

He replied, “You called.”

“How uniquely you interpret words! I had only written that I could not wait to see you later today. We *did* have a planned engagement later, where we were to meet at your abode, in fact.”

“You wrote that you could not wait to see me. Is that not a calling?”

“I suppose a part of me did wish that you come as you have done,” said Elizabeth. “Now that you are here, I suppose I should share with you my great news.”

“What is it, my dear?” Darcy was all ears.

Elizabeth took his hand and proclaimed joyfully, “I love you.”

The smile that appeared on Darcy’s face, the light in his eyes, and the stillness of his person spoke of his happiness. “Truly?”

“Yes, Fitzwilliam. I am completely, utterly, incandescently in love with you.”

Darcy could not contain his elation. “Oh, Elizabeth, my love!” he shouted, picking her up and spinning her around. “You have made me the happiest being alive! My dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth!”

Elizabeth made Darcy even happier still, when she initiated a kiss, which grew to be less chaste by the second. Thus occupied, the couple lost track of time, and were eventually discovered by Mr. Gardiner.

“Mr. Darcy, a word,” said the older man, looking none too pleased.

Any embarrassment Darcy felt was outweighed by his pride. Boldly, he kissed Elizabeth’s hand and silently reassured her that he would survive the meeting, having done so once before, and followed Mr. Gardiner to his study. There, he received a thorough lecture, and even if he had rarely been spoken to so harshly in his life, and by a tradesman no less, he was not at all offended; in fact, he would have thought less of him if he had not been reprimanded. His respect for Mr. Gardiner grew, and he endeavoured to earn back the man’s good opinion for a second time. Perhaps he would consider naming Pemberley’s lake after him.

Mr. Gardiner’s ire soon turned out to be the least concerning among their relatives. Darcy’s uncle, Lord Matlock, was in town, and Darcy took the opportunity to inform him of his upcoming nuptials before word got out that he was engaged. In spite of the forewarning, Lord Matlock was entirely displeased to hear that Darcy would be marrying a penniless, country gentlewoman with no connections. He then made it clear that no tradesman, uncle to Darcy’s betrothed or otherwise, would be dining at *his* table, and thus, he was not introduced to

Elizabeth and the Gardiners. Darcy would not subject Elizabeth to a cold reception, and only when his cousin, the easy-natured Colonel Fitzwilliam, returned to England in a few months, would he even consider his uncle's house safe enough to bring his bride to.

The only other person in town Darcy would have deemed important enough to share news of his engagement with was his best friend Bingley, but he was unprepared for any encounter between the two of them. Subsequently, he did not seek out Bingley at all, and even hoped that rumours of his engagement, which were surely spreading from the increasing frequency of Elizabeth's outings with Georgiana and his own strolls with her in the park, would not reach the man.

On his last day in town, Darcy was rejoicing that he had not seen Bingley the entirety of his trip. He should not have been surprised when the young gentleman showed up at Darcy House half an hour later.

"Darcy! You are here! I called on you the other day, but your butler said you were with your solicitor," said Bingley, entering Darcy's study.

"Bingley," Darcy greeted. "I did not know you had called. You did not leave your card, else I would have visited you at Hurst's."

He tried not to show his panic, for Elizabeth was currently in the house, and could be faintly heard in the other room practising duets with Georgiana. Darcy was not prepared for such a discovery by Bingley.

"Oh, it was not anything too urgent. I only need your advice again, but the matter need not be resolved until months ahead. I was wondering if I should renew my lease for Netherfield," said Bingley. He sighed. "With Miss Elizabeth marrying, I do not know how I could bear returning."

Darcy stiffened at the mention of his betrothed. Carefully considering his words, he replied, "With her marrying, you do not have to worry about seeing her often in Hertfordshire."

"You mean to say that her husband will keep her far away from her family home?" cried Bingley.

Darcy had thought about the notion often. Elizabeth would not miss her family much, he supposed; even Jane, her dearest sister, had been disappointingly unsupportive of her, which would make the distance a little more bearable for Elizabeth. It also went without saying that Darcy himself could do without having to suffer through the company of Elizabeth's immediate family. Thus, he replied, "You cannot expect a man to neglect his own estate. He cannot be in Hertfordshire all the time."

"What a lucky man, to have Miss Elizabeth by his side for the rest of his life," bemoaned Bingley. "You have yet to tell me who he is – but I

beg you, do not inform me. I want her known to me forever as a Miss Bennet, one of the five young, beautiful, single Bennet daughters, and out of them, the jewel of the county of Hertfordshire.”

In that moment, it felt as if Darcy was given a gift. He had no issue obeying the request of his friend. The conversation shifted, with him becoming a little more comfortable and readily giving advice on how to manage an estate from afar.

“Bingley, are you listening?”

“What? Oh – yes.”

“Bingley.”

“I am sorry, Darcy, but it is so much easier to follow your advice when I am immersed in the task itself.”

Suddenly, the tune from the piano switched to what Darcy easily recognised as Georgiana's advanced solo playing, Elizabeth's lovely voice accompanying her.

“Your sister has company over? That is great!” exclaimed Bingley, happy that the shy Miss Darcy was making friends. The longer the music went on, however, the more his enthusiasm waned. “Darcy, everything reminds me of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I'm deluding myself that I am hearing her beautiful voice.”

Darcy frowned, but said nothing.

“Is your sister's friend out yet?” Bingley asked suddenly. “Her voice is simply angelic. Perhaps, if I am introduced, I may forget about Elizabeth Bennet...”

Darcy's eyes narrowed. Bingley saw his murderous stare and immediately retracted his statement.

“Forgive me, Darcy. You are always telling me to stop falling in love with every other lady I meet. I should take your advice more seriously.”

“You misunderstand me,” said Darcy. “For your own sake, you should try to move on from Elizabeth. However, the lady singing is not single, and you ought to know more about a lady other than her voice before you start having designs on her.”

“It is how I fell in love with Elizabeth – by hearing her sing in the garden,” shared Bingley, sighing. “It was when I first moved to Hertfordshire. I was returning calls from the gentlemen in the neighbourhood, and at Longbourn, Mr. Bennet showed me his favorite view of the garden. Elizabeth was singing softly, so angelically and freely, for she did not know she was being watched. She was an angel among the blooms. Her bonnet covered her face, but it was a pretty bonnet, and I was able to admire her handsome figure. I had heard so much about her, from her father, and I was so sure that he would have approved of me as a suitor.”

“Enough,” said Darcy. He cursed Mr. Bennet in his head, who for all

his laziness, appeared to be as scheming as his wife. That Mr. Bennet would have given *Bingley* his blessing to wed Elizabeth, but not him, was outrageous. "You cannot move on from Elizabeth by recalling every moment of your acquaintance. And you cannot have possibly loved her from first sight. If that was the foundation of your supposed love, perhaps you did not love her at all. Perhaps you only fancied yourself in love with another pretty face."

"My feelings were true this time, Darcy. I swear I have never felt so sure of them."

"Whatever they may be, it can mean nothing now. Elizabeth is not for you, Bingley."

"You are right." Bingley tried to stand up tall. "I cannot be in love with a lady who will soon be married. I cannot. Nothing can happen between us. Unless, the man dies, and she becomes a widow –"

"Bingley."

"I am trying to be positive here, Darcy."

"Optimism does not usually involve wishing the death of another."

"I am not exactly wishing! I am merely thinking of the all the possibilities that may happen." Bingley stared wistfully at the air.

"Bingley."

"Sorry, Darcy. I ought not to tarry here any longer. Caroline and Louisa are expecting me to escort them somewhere. I do not know why they do not ask Hurst... Would you like to come along with me? I am sure my sisters would not mind, and I would like to have some manly company."

"I am afraid I have some business I must attend to." Darcy gestured to the neat stack of papers on his desk. He *did* have some papers to overlook, and he *did* have plans with Elizabeth and Georgiana later, but Bingley did not need to know the latter, and in general, he would rather not spend time with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst.

"Ah, well, I would hate to be you," said Bingley, eyeing the papers warily.

With that, Bingley thanked Darcy for listening to his troubles and giving him much sought-after advice, bid farewell, and left Darcy House. Darcy leaned back in his chair and ran his hand over his hair, relieved that he had been in his study and not in the music room with Elizabeth and Georgiana when Bingley had been shown into the house. He waited five minutes before he stood and made his way to the other room.

The music was considerably louder in the hallway, and it called to Darcy like a siren. The vision when he entered the music room was even greater than the sound. Elizabeth and Georgiana sitting side by side, happily united as they sang and played, was to Darcy unmatched domesticity. The ladies noticed him right away, however, and

immediately ceased their playing to greet him.

“Why did you stop?” asked Darcy.

“We were practising for you,” said Elizabeth. “Your ears shall only hear our song at its most polished state.”

“I must apologise, for I have already heard some of it in the hall.” Darcy thought it prudent to keep the knowledge that he could vaguely hear their playing in his study to himself, else they react to the information by practising more quietly or insisting on adding buffers to the room to inhibit its sound from travelling throughout the house. He wanted to hear Elizabeth’s voice always.

“Then I must apologise, for my singing was quite flawed. I hope that Georgiana’s beautiful playing was able to sooth your ears.” Elizabeth smiled at Georgiana, who blushed at the compliment.

Darcy replied, “Yes, Georgiana’s playing is always lovely, but you must not disparage yourself, Elizabeth. I could not detect a fault in your song.”

“My brother is right,” chimed in Georgiana.

“You both perjure yourself, for my pronunciation was very dreadful.”

“Perhaps brother will allow you a study under a language master in the future.”

“If that is what you wish,” said Darcy to Elizabeth. “Though, for particular languages, I may have the proficiency to offer you my own services.”

“I think I will prefer that, for you will certainly handle my impatience, among other things, better than a master would,” replied Elizabeth. The bantering between her and Darcy continued, with Georgiana watching wide eyed, unfamiliar with such openness from her brother.

Later, when it was time for Elizabeth to leave, Darcy requested a moment alone with her. Georgiana smiled knowingly at him and happily left the room.

“Her spirits are much repaired since last summer. In fact, I have never seen her so cheerful,” observed Darcy. He stared into Elizabeth’s fine dark eyes. “It is thanks to you.”

“You give me too much credit.”

“I only speak the truth. I had never seen Georgiana smile so much in my life.”

“Georgiana is a dear girl, who thinks the world of you. I must agree with her that you are the best of men.” Darcy’s shoulder sagged a little, and Elizabeth must have noticed, for she asked him for the cause of his despondency.

Darcy sighed. “I am afraid I am not as good as you and my sister think. Bingley came over today, not too long ago.”

"I see. I take it that he did not take the news of our engagement well?"

Darcy was silent.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "Did you inform him of our engagement at all?"

Darcy coughed. "Well..."

"Fitzwilliam! Whyever did you not?"

"He knew you were spoken for, and begged me not to tell him the man that you were to wed."

"We both are aware that if he knew *you* were that man, he would have wanted you to tell him!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "I know the situation is most unpleasant, but what is the alternative?"

"I was planning on telling him after he begins to admire another lady," admitted Darcy. "That way, he may not feel so hurt, but unfortunately, he is taking a while longer than usual to fall out of love."

"My dear, if we need to extend our engagement period, I would be amenable. You cannot forsake a friendship as precious as the one you have with Mr. Bingley."

"That is unnecessary. I am eager to wed you, and a long engagement will mean my aunt and uncle's most unpleasant attempts to interfere." Darcy took Elizabeth's hand and placed upon it a kiss. "I will tell Bingley tomorrow morning, before we leave for Hertfordshire."

Elizabeth smiled and went on her toes to peck Darcy's cheek. "For luck, my love. You will need it, I think."

"I thank you. However, I believe I will require more luck than that."

After Elizabeth bestowed a dozen more kisses on Darcy, he again took her hand, placing a small box in it. "For you, my dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth looked questioningly at Darcy. When she opened the box, she gasped. "Oh, Fitzwilliam, it is beautiful!"

"It was my mother's, and before her, my grandmother's, and so on." He proceeded to take the ring and fit it through her finger. "You shall have another at the wedding ceremony of course, but I would like you to wear this during our engagement, short as it is."

"I will treasure this for as long as I live," said Elizabeth. She placed a hand on Darcy's cheek. "And I will treasure *you* for as long as I live, my love."

Darcy could not help but kiss her.

The next morning, Darcy called on the Hurst townhouse, asking for Bingley.

"I am afraid he is not here, sir," said the butler.

"He is out so early?" Darcy was surprised; Bingley rising early was

not unheard of, but rather rare, while in town. "Did he say when he would return?"

"Not for a few days, sir."

"A few days? Where did he go?"

"Mr. Bingley did not say."

That was more like the Bingley Darcy knew. "Do his brother and sisters know where he went?"

"It is unlikely, sir. He left them a note, but it is, ahem, illegible."

That sounded even more like Bingley. Darcy asked to read the note, as he had a lot of experience deciphering Bingley's handwriting. However, the butler was right. The note was completely indecipherable. Thanking him, Darcy left a note of his own, telling Bingley he desired to meet with him as soon as possible, before heading to the Gardiners. Mayhap he would be able to get a moment alone with Elizabeth before they were on their way back to Longbourn.

Mr. Bennet leaned back on his favourite chair in his study, his chin resting on his poised fingers. The man in front of him appeared restless. It was a good thing that the ladies of Longbourn and the little Gardiner children were visiting Meryton, else they make a commotion of their own.

"Mr. Bingley," greeted Mr. Bennet. "It is always nice to see you. I am surprised, however; I did not know that Netherfield was reopening."

"Mr. Bennet, I am sorry for the unanticipated call, but I had to come back. I know I should not, that Miss Elizabeth is soon to be engaged, if not already so, but I have read every announcement in the newspaper, and her name was never mentioned. It gave me hope, that maybe her engagement is not as strong as I have been told, that maybe I would be able to fight for Miss Elizabeth's hand even if her betrothed may be the first son of an earl, or an earl himself, or even a duke!" Bingley stood up. "I know that I am a mere tradesman's son, that I am only newly acquiring an estate of my own, but I am prepared to compete with my superiors in order to win the lady I love!"

"You do not know?"

"What?" Bingley, shaken out of the midst of his enthusiastic assertions, sat back down. "What do I not know?"

The Bennet daughters did not get the entirety of their silliness from their mother. Mr. Bennet was silly in his own right. His sense of humour, half of the time, relied on actions that were quite disrespectful. He had no qualms, for instance, keeping Mrs. Bennet misinformed of matters she should really be privy of. Therefore,

instead of telling, or even hinting, to Mr. Bingley that Elizabeth would be marrying his friend in a few days, he said, "I am sorry, Mr. Bingley, but the man who is engaged to my daughter is the sort of man I would never cross. I only hope that the next man who wants to wed one of my three eligible daughters owns a house in Hertfordshire."

Bingley appeared near tears, but at least he was not a tumultuous, weeping mess, as Mr. Bennet sensed he may have been if he had been told the truth about Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bennet congratulated himself for his hindsight; he would let those gentlemen have their own chaotic encounters and revelations, while he let himself have as much peace in his house as he could implement.

Mr. Bennet continued, "Now, Mr. Bingley, you must comfort yourself with the knowledge that you are the most eligible gentleman in this neighbourhood. Many young ladies here have already fallen in love with you, to speak nothing of their mothers and fathers. Why, even I would be happy to call you son-in-law. If Elizabeth had not accepted that man, I would have wished for her to wed you."

"I thank you for your compliments, sir," Bingley managed to say.

"A little heartbreak will give you stronger character. I remember when my eldest, Jane, thought herself in love with a man from town. The match was not to be, but you see how well she is today; in fact, she has never been more blooming." Mr. Bennet offered Bingley a drink. "Jane has always been a sweet, kind soul. She can see the best in every situation, and I am sure that she will be able to lend a caring ear if you ever wish to speak to her about anything, including lost love. I know that there is often a disparity between the younger and older folks which makes it easier to converse with someone your same age."

"Miss Elizabeth has always told me how wonderfully kind her sister is..."

When Bingley left, Mr. Bennet poured himself another drink. He sat back and sipped it thoughtfully.

"He came back for her," he marveled aloud. He laughed. Truth be told, after Bingley had left Netherfield, his hopes for him returning were not as high as he would have liked. Although Mr. Bennet did not fault him for it, Bingley's sisters obviously had a semblance of control on him. He had thought for certain that if Elizabeth met him in town, he would be shaken out of his sisters' hold and proceed to develop his relationship with her. Then, she returned with *Mr. Darcy*. Yet Bingley, unaware of Elizabeth's stay in town, unaware of his friend's betrayal, came back! He came back for Elizabeth, and even after repeating the fact over and over again, Mr. Bennet was astounded. He had always thought well of Bingley, but now he knew that the man had a spine, and was feeling quite bereft that Elizabeth had chosen *Mr. Darcy*.

instead of him to be her husband and his son-in-law. Hopefully, Jane would have a chance to catch Bingley's attention, and one of his daughters would be the mistress of Netherfield after all.

Chapter 12

To deal with his heartbreak, Mr. Bingley secluded himself at Netherfield. The house was not officially open, and none but the servants who travelled with him and Mr. Bennet knew that he was under its roof. He planned to return to town on the morrow, where he hoped that all of the hustle and bustle would provide enough distraction.

Thus, when Mrs. Bennet, her daughters, nieces and nephews returned from their excursion to Meryton, and later when Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, Georgiana, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrived from town, there was neither Bingley nor news of him in sight. Mr. Bennet was certainly unwilling to let his knowledge be known, else Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley would have some loud confrontation and leave a discomfiting cloud over his little Lizzy's final days at Longbourn. If he thought Mr. Bingley had a chance to win over Elizabeth from Mr. Darcy, he might have said something, but both his daughter and her betrothed were such obstinate people. He could not imagine Mr. Darcy allowing himself to be jilted or Elizabeth allowing herself to be forced into marriage.

The Bennets, Mr. Bennet included, were pleasantly surprised by Mr. Darcy's shy younger sister. They found little similarity between her and her serious, haughty brother. Mrs. Bennet in particular appeared to be fascinated with the girl, displaying a great deal of fondness towards her, while keeping herself, and her youngest daughters whenever they were in her presence, to a higher sense of decorum in an effort to please the high standing heiress. The patriarch supposed that he could accept Mr. Darcy as his son-in-law if Miss Darcy was around to calm his household.

Darcy did not know what Georgiana would think of Elizabeth's boisterous family, tamed a little as they were, and half feared for her reception.

"Mrs. Bennet is perhaps a bit loud," said Georgiana later to him in private, "but she was so hospitable to me, and she seems to like you very much."

Darcy thought that Mrs. Bennet liked his wealth more than she did his character, but instead of commenting that to Georgiana, he asked about her opinion of Mr. Bennet.

"I did not see him often, but he was kind to me as well."

“And Elizabeth’s sisters?”

Georgiana hesitated in answering. “Jane is kind, but she did not speak with me much.” She frowned. “I do not think she liked me, although she could not be more civil. Lizzy is worried about her, and says that she has been acting unusual lately.”

“Elizabeth has mentioned the same to me.” Darcy was once again disappointed in the sister Elizabeth loved so much. While he did not exactly think well of Jane, she was the least embarrassing of Elizabeth’s sisters by far, and thought that Georgiana might get along with her, if she could not with the others.

“Mary does not seem to like me either.”

“I do not think that is true. She is most likely jealous of your talent at the pianoforte, but that does not mean that she does not like you.”

“Oh. She should not be. I think she plays quite well, especially considering she never had a master.” Then, with much more enthusiasm, Georgiana exclaimed, “I like Kitty very much. I think we get along well. She said she would also write to me when she writes to Lizzy.”

Finally, thought Darcy. *At least one of Elizabeth’s sisters may become good friends with Georgiana.* He knew that Kitty was extremely close to Lydia, however, and worried a bit on that end. “I am glad to hear that. Hopefully, you will be a good influence on her. And what of Lydia?”

Georgiana turned a bit pale as she spoke, “Lydia talked of Mr. Wickham.”

Darcy stiffened. “I am sorry.”

“It is well. You warned me that he was stationed here, so I was prepared. I told Lydia that he was not a good man.”

“Did she believe you?”

“She said that she merely liked to...admire him from afar, but that although he is a red coat, he was also a steward’s son. She believes that once Lizzy marries you...”

“Once Elizabeth marries me, what will happen?”

Georgiana blushed.

“You may tell me, Georgiana. I am used to the Bennets' manners.”

Darcy supposed that with Elizabeth marrying into significant wealth, Lydia would not settle for anyone less than a lord, if only in attempt to outdo her sisters. His speculations were in the correct vein when Georgiana said, “She says that she must marry, at the very least, a Colonel, if she does not want to, um, lose, to her sisters.”

It was a silly, vain thing to think, but quite beneficial with Wickham meandering about. In that regard, he supposed that they should hope that the mindset would remain with her.

“Elizabeth’s cousins are also lovely. I like the Gardiners very much,” said Georgiana, moving the topic away from Wickham and Lydia.

"I do as well. Elizabeth and I shall invite them to Pemberley often."

"Do you think Lizzy will like Pemberley?"

"I know that she will. Pemberley was made for her."

"I agree, brother."

The hour was getting late, so Georgiana retired for the evening. Mrs. Bennet had prepared a nice, cosy room for her in the space that had before been dedicated to two of the Gardiner children. The matron did not even have to bribe the children to share the nursery with their younger siblings, for they had made a game for themselves, daring each other to brave the scent of what had been Mr. Collin's room. Darcy was still placed in Elizabeth's room, to his satisfaction.

The day before the wedding, Darcy received a most surprising note from his uncle. His Fitzwilliam relations, including his uncle, aunt, and eldest cousin, were to attend the wedding.

"I will endeavour to not embarrass you in front of his lordship," said Elizabeth to Darcy as they walked to Oakham Mount, Georgiana, Kitty, and Lydia trailing a great distance behind them.

"I am not worried about you. I cannot be prouder to be making you my wife," spoke Darcy.

"You are worried about my family, then."

"They are not part of the society my uncle is familiar with. Yet, my uncle disparaged you and your family before he had even met you and your aunt and uncle, who are some of the most pleasant, refined people I have ever known. Beyond that, he did not trust my judgement. That he thinks I am making a mistake marrying you – it is completely offensive. I would rather not have him come only to be cold to you, especially when he writes that he is only here for appearances. There is a good chance, however, that he will be charmed by you, and realise that he has been a fool."

"Let us hope he is also here to make amends to you," added Elizabeth. "And what of the highly estimable Lady Catherine? Has she heard of our happy news?"

"She has not."

"I suppose it has only been a short amount of time since you proposed and I accepted. Will she hear of the news from the newspaper?"

"I will write to her today."

"I hope that Mary and Mr. Collin's future felicity in Kent will not be affected by your aunt's disappointment."

"She cannot simply take away his living. She would be seen as a villain if she did so, no matter how ridiculous her parson is. I'm afraid any invitations for them to dine at Rosings is an entirely different matter, however."

"That ridiculous parson you speak of is to be your brother."

"It does not make him less ridiculous."

"No, it does not."

"He is also to be *your* brother, and as of now, he is your cousin and the heir to your childhood home," pointed out Darcy.

"And do you think less of me for it, Mr. Darcy?"

"Not at all. In fact, I believe it shows the strength of my regard to you."

"Tread carefully, Mr. Darcy, or you may end up offending me."

"Is it not romantic that I would wed you regardless of your wealth and connections?"

"If I did not know how good you were, I would be vexed at your pride!"

"Would you not wed me if I were penniless?"

"You could be a footman, and I would figure out a way for us to be together," said Elizabeth. "Though I do not know if you would be able to live so humbly."

"Of course I would, if I had you by my side."

By then, they had reached the view they sought out, and had outpaced the others so much that it would be some time before they were even in sight of their younger sisters. Elizabeth took a moment to look wistfully at what would, as of tomorrow, become her old home. Hertfordshire was simple, but beautiful. It would always hold a place in her heart, and she did not think she would be able to go a year without revisiting the area at least once. It was where she had the fondest memories of her and her sisters, and it was where she and Mr. Darcy had first met. Mr. Darcy understood her thoughts very well, and placed an arm around her waist as they both gazed at the splendors of the land.

"I will always be thankful that I found you here, in this quaint country," said Darcy. "We will return soon for your sister's wedding, and every time we are to and from London, we will make an effort to stop here."

It did not take long, however, for her and Darcy to turn their gazes away from the view and take advantage of their being alone for a while.

The morning of the wedding was a mixture of excitement and nervousness for all. Elizabeth, restless from a near sleepless night, had barely a moment to herself. Mrs. Bennet fussed over her while Kitty and Lydia fought over the things Elizabeth would leave at Longbourn. Mary seemed to have put aside any resentment she had towards Elizabeth for marrying before her and to Lady Catherine's daughter's supposed betrothed, and peppered her with well-meant, though quite questionable, advice. Most importantly, however, Jane's usual kind and sweet side made a reappearance.

"I will miss you," said Jane, hugging her sister tightly. "Please forgive me for being so unlike myself as of late! I am happy for you, Lizzy, truly. I cannot be gladder that you are marrying for love, and to a good man."

Elizabeth was overcome with joy, and eagerly returned the hug. "Jane, you do not know how much that means to me."

"Jane, do not smother Lizzy so! You will wrinkle her dress," cried Mrs. Bennet. "Lizzy, you must be more careful. Mr. Darcy expects a pristine looking bride, I am sure. His uncle, the Earl, will be there, and will bring with him his wife, Lady Matlock! The Countess! She will surely take notice if you look anything less than perfect, and you must impress his family."

"Why is Mr. Bingley not coming?" asked Kitty. Elizabeth frowned, Jane blushed, Mary sniffed, and Lydia laughed.

Mrs. Bennet, without missing a beat, answered, "You know how fond Mr. Bingley was of Lizzy. He may be jealous, or angry, at Mr. Darcy for stealing Lizzy away from him. It is no matter to us, however. Mr. Darcy is the richer man, and if Mr. Bingley never reopens Netherfield again, it is no matter to us. Our Lizzy will be Mrs. Darcy! What carriages and jewels she will have! How grand she will be! Mr. Bingley is nothing to Mr. Darcy, nothing at all!"

"Mama," chided Elizabeth.

"You should not say such things about Mr. Bingley, mama. He is a fine gentleman," said Jane.

"But he is not as rich as Lizzy's Mr. Darcy. You seem quite fond of Mr. Bingley, Jane. If he ever relinquishes his love for our Lizzy, mayhap he will fall in love with *you*. It would be very nice to have you as the mistress of Netherfield and so near me, even if Mr. Bingley is not a lord."

Before anyone could respond, Mr. Bennet entered the room, looking as though he should be in mourning. "Lizzy, are you ready?"

"I am, but papa, you should not look so sad," replied Elizabeth.

"The daughter I had thought the most sensible out of all my children is leaving my house in mere hours, with a man I hardly know."

"We know that Mr. Darcy is rich, which is the most important trait that matters," said Mrs. Bennet. "He has the means and more to take care of our Lizzy."

"I wish you would have gotten to know him better while he stayed at Longbourn, papa," spoke Elizabeth. "You would have seen that he is the best of men."

"You know how your father is, always hiding away in his study, and your own Mr. Darcy barely speaks two words to anyone. Though it is best not to speak of, let alone think about these things right now,"

said Mrs. Bennet. She straightened out a tiny bit of lace on Elizabeth's dress. "Now, remember what I told you about how slowly you should walk when you enter the church. You must imagine that you are a great, sophisticated lady like your future aunt, the one that Mr. Collins is always going on about – Lady Catherine."

Elizabeth nodded at her mother, but shared an amused glance with Jane. She would certainly not think of herself as the infamous Lady Catherine on her wedding day!

"Lady Catherine is not above entering a church and loudly objecting to a marriage," said the Viscount to his cousin Darcy at Pulvis Lodge. The Earl and his family had found a way to open the grand house for their very, very brief stay in the countryside, for the inns in Meryton simply would not have done for them. Darcy was there to get them situated with Georgiana, who was to be under their care as her companion, Mrs. Annesley, had been given leave to visit her family, and he and Elizabeth would be off on their own for some time as newlyweds.

"She has no grounds to object my marriage to Elizabeth," replied Darcy.

"She is not the most sensible person, cousin. Really, she thought that you would offer for Anne! No, our aunt is not above attempting to stop your marriage. You might have burned the letter she sent you, and the one she sent us to give to you, but you must know that simply ignoring her does not make her disappear. Let us hope that she will not embarrass us all if she steps foot into this little village of a county."

"Elizabeth will become Mrs. Darcy today, and anyone who dares try to stop that from happening will receive nothing but censure from me, aunt or not." Darcy checked his reflection in a teacup, looking to see if his cravat was pristine enough, or if he had to get his valet to fix it again.

"You look fine, Darcy. It is only your wedding."

Darcy scoffed. Today was to be the happiest day of his life to date, in which he and Elizabeth would finally be formally bound to each other. His cousin would not have known the bliss of being in love; his marriage was arranged, and even with two children, there was scarcely affection between him and his wife. The Viscountess had refused to join her husband on the trip, citing that she would not support the imprudent match. Coming from a powerful family herself, she was in a position to disobey the Earl of Matlock's wishes for everyone to at least pretend to approve of the new Mrs. Darcy.

"Darcy, you must stop pacing. It is giving me a headache," said the

Viscount.

"You may turn around so you face the other side of the room, then."

"I will still be able to hear your steps. Quit it, man! What are you so anxious for?"

"I am not anxious. I am impatient."

"I still cannot believe that you choose to marry a dowerless, connectionless country girl."

"You will not insult Mrs. Darcy."

"Do not be so eager; she is not Mrs. Darcy yet! Right now she is only Miss Elizabeth Bennet, a girl with nothing but her charms to recommend her. I admit, I am partially here because I am curious about the lady who has turned my normally intelligent, dutiful cousin into a fool in love – where are you going?" asked the Viscount as Darcy moved towards the doors.

"I am checking on Georgiana." He was also going to summon his valet to ask for a second opinion on whether his shoes looked clean enough, but his cousin did not need to know that. Darcy grinned as he walked down the hallway. He was going to marry Elizabeth!

The ceremony was soon upon them, and Darcy, waiting for Elizabeth to enter the church doors, felt a strong urge to pace. Alas, he could not, else he look like an imbecile, so he ended up appearing stiff and stoic. All changed when Elizabeth entered the church. His face lit up, and his smile was so wide that it elicited some gasps from the Bennets; if his Fitzwilliam relations were less decorous, they would have gasped as well. He had never seen a more beautiful sight than his darling Elizabeth, walking towards him with bright eyes, a lovely smile, and rosy cheeks. He had already known that she was the most handsome lady of his acquaintance, but she was so stunning he truly believed her ethereal. Not once did he take his eyes off her during the entirety of the ceremony.

Soon, they were wed, and with no objections from an outraged Lady Catherine or Mr. Bingley in sight. There was no mistake in Darcy's pride as Elizabeth was finally, to all of the world, Mrs. Darcy.

The wedding breakfast was impressive, and Mrs. Bennet was gratified to receive the abundance of praise for it, especially those from the Earl's wife. When asked how she was able to put such grandeur together in so little time, she claimed that she could not do any less, as her dearest daughter (for that was what Elizabeth was to her now) and son-in-law were only deserving of the very best of everything. She did not tell anyone that she had, for many months, been in her mind planning a wedding breakfast between Elizabeth and another gentleman.

Darcy was glad that his mother-in-law's behaviour was subdued. Much like when she was first told that he would be marrying Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet was too in awe to talk much in the presence of an Earl.

"Mrs. Darcy is handsome," his uncle told him, looking at Elizabeth, who had a crowd of neighbours around her. "That is good, but too be expected when she is neither wealthy nor well-connected. She conducts herself well. She may be a little lively, but it is tolerable, I suppose. I am actually surprised at how spirited and well-spoken she is. I would have imagined you being with someone less vivacious. Why, if your bride had more of a dowry, and less relations in trade, I would have thought her good for Richard!"

Darcy did not appreciate the jest; he had enough trouble with Bingley's affection for Elizabeth, and did not need to be doubly jealous. "You approve of our marriage, then?"

"I did not say that."

"You should be happy that Darcy married at all, father," said the Viscount, who had just walked over to them, drink in hand. "Darcy, I hope you plan to spend more time at Pemberley with your wife than here. The society in this neighbourhood is dreadful. That one talkative fellow – Sir William Lucas, I believe? He implied that Mrs. Darcy was very nearly Mrs. Bingley!"

"Who is Bingley?" asked the Earl. "The name is familiar, but I cannot envision a face."

"He is Darcy's only friend."

"Elizabeth was never nearly Mrs. Bingley. Sir William should know better than to spread such falsehoods," stated Darcy. "And I have plenty of friends."

"My brother does not count as a friend," countered his cousin. "Is it really a falsehood? Come, Darcy, you can tell your closest relations the truth. Did Mrs. Darcy jilt Bingley? Is that why he is not here? I am more impressed with her by the second."

"Bingley did not propose marriage to Elizabeth. He was not even courting her."

The Viscount stared very critically at Darcy. When he finished his observation, he laughed. "My goodness, you have had a falling out with him! Your only friend, and over a woman! I would not have believed it of you."

"We did not have a falling out."

"Then why, I ask again, is he not here? These people say that he has recently leased an estate that is only three miles from your beloved's home! There cannot be a reason why he is not present to congratulate you."

Darcy was silent.

His cousin raised an eyebrow. "This is incredible! You have really dug yourself a grave. No man will forgive you for stealing his lady, not even one as good natured as that Bingley fellow. You will be left quite friendless, I daresay."

"Your cousin is right," said the Earl, "but it is no matter. I can always introduce you to many men of high standing. It would be great for you, and us, to foster a good relationship with the right peers."

"That is unnecessary," spoke Darcy. "Excuse me. I am going to my wife. We must be leaving soon if we want to make it to town by nightfall."

He enjoyed calling Elizabeth his wife, and when he went to Elizabeth, he relished greeting her as Mrs. Darcy.

"Is the carriage ready?" asked Elizabeth, smiling charmingly at him. Her sisters and friends beside her watched them curiously. No doubt, they were still a bit wary of him. Elizabeth had recently told him that he did not exactly make a good impression in the neighbourhood when he first arrived, with his arrogance and unwillingness to dance or make conversation. Darcy was a little offended, but mostly did not care, so long as he had Elizabeth's esteem.

"It is. Our luggage is heading towards our town house as we speak," answered he. They were to stay there for a fortnight before travelling to Pemberley, during which they were to stop in Hertfordshire to attend Mary's wedding.

"You are most fastidious." There was a twinkle in Elizabeth's eyes, and since Darcy could not kiss her lips in front of company, he kissed her hand instead.

"Oh, do not be so shocked," Lydia loudly whispered to Miss Lucases. "I have seen Mr. Darcy kiss Lizzy on the *lips* before, when they thought that no one was watching."

Elizabeth made her final farewells to her family and neighbours, and Darcy made sure that Georgiana was comfortably situated with their aunt and uncle.

Once the couple was alone in their carriage, Darcy relaxed his countenance and brought his bride into a searing kiss. "My love, you are the most beautiful being in all of the world."

Elizabeth laughed. "You have told me so already, my handsome husband. My vanity is in danger of becoming too large, but then again, for all of your compliments, you tend to argue with me on every other subject."

"I admit that I sometimes take an opinion that I do not truly believe, if only to see you enflamed."

"You intentionally provoke me? Whyever would you want to see me angry? There were certain instances at Netherfield, when I was truly vexed at you; I could have seriously disliked you, and it could all have

turned out very wrong for us.”

“When you are vexed, there is a passion in your eyes,” said Darcy, tilting Elizabeth’s head up so their gazes met. His other hand moved to her waist. “Even if you hated me, I do not think that you could stay away for long. I would have been able to convince you that I am the only man you could ever be prevailed upon to marry. You cannot deny that we belong together in every world.”

“Fitzwilliam,” whispered Elizabeth, growing woozy under his gaze. “That is the most arrogant thing I have heard from you, and I have heard a lot of pompous things come from your mouth.”

Darcy ran a finger over Elizabeth’s lips. “I have heard many derisive statements expel from your pretty mouth as well.” He leaned in again for a kiss, and a few hundred more.

“I have never had so pleasant a carriage ride,” said Elizabeth once they arrived at Darcy House. Darcy was looking very smug, until Elizabeth continued to say, “It is all due to your fine carriage, I think. So large and comfortable! I have married well.”

“Mrs. Darcy, you are a teasing minx,” said Darcy, picking up his bride and carrying her into their home.

“Mr. Darcy! You must put me down! What will the servants think?” Elizabeth whispered furiously.

Darcy only laughed, and soon Elizabeth was laughing with him. The staff, who had stood in a line to greet the newlyweds, were shocked to see the couple in such a carefree, cheerful state, especially the infamously mirth-lacking Mr. Darcy.

After refreshing themselves from their journey, Darcy and Elizabeth relaxed and enjoyed an intimate dinner together. Darcy’s cook had all of their favourites on the menu, and Darcy had the pleasure of feeding Elizabeth from his forks and spoons. When they could eat no more, Elizabeth delighted Darcy by playing and singing for him, and he delighted her by reading aloud in his low, soothing voice.

“Are you ready to retire, my love?” he asked after finishing the excerpt. Elizabeth blushed and nodded, and they agreed to meet in Darcy’s chambers after preparing themselves for bed.

Again, Darcy was in awe of Elizabeth’s beauty when she entered his room in a flimsy night gown, her hair down. He was unable to look away. “You are a goddess,” he praised, and he truly thought that she was.

“I have something for you,” Elizabeth said shyly.

“And I you,” replied Darcy, smiling. He directed her towards a table, where a set of jewels were laid on display.

“They are beautiful! And they match my ring. Thank you,

Fitzwilliam,” said Elizabeth, observing each piece with appreciation. She turned towards her husband and presented him with a small sachet, grinning. “It seems that we had similar trains of thought.”

Darcy looked like a little boy receiving a sweet treat when he saw the handkerchief Elizabeth embroidered for him in the sachet. He looked brighter still when he found a ring wrapped in it. “Is this your hair?” he asked, eagerly studying what was within the jewelry.

Elizabeth blushed. “It is.”

“I will wear this until I die,” declared Darcy. He approached Elizabeth and softly kissed her. Elizabeth deepened their embrace, and he felt fully, completely, wholly loved by her.

He fiddled with her gown, and only pulled away from Elizabeth’s lips to see her when the fabric fell to the floor. “You are a goddess,” he repeated. “My dearest, loveliest, Lizzy, you are the most beautiful creature to have ever been born.”

“Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth whispered, but she could not say more as Darcy touched her for the first time without barriers, and she was utterly consumed in him as he was in her.

Chapter 13

Darcy awoke the morning after his wedding to Elizabeth shifting around in their bed. He felt like the most fortunate man in the world, and only hoped that Elizabeth felt as if she was the most fortunate woman. Elizabeth had moved to tuck herself in his arm, and had placed a hand on his bare chest. He bowed down his head and was able to kiss the top of her head, where her hair was particularly tousled.

“Fitzwilliam,” murmured Elizabeth.

“Are you awake, my lovely Mrs. Darcy?”

Elizabeth opened her eyes and answered, “Yes, my love.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I am a bit sore,” Elizabeth admitted. “But I am so happy, and you are so warm. I will never want to leave this bed if you are in it.”

“Then we shall not leave it,” said Darcy. “Were you...pleased last evening?”

“Oh, yes. Very much so. Were you?”

“Of course. I have never been more pleased. I only worried that you did not enjoy it as much as I did.”

“Fitzwilliam, you must never worry about that. I could not have enjoyed it more,” said Elizabeth, stroking Darcy’s torso.

“Still, I believe I must improve myself. You know that I am fastidious. I aspire to know every part of you, Elizabeth, so thoroughly that I will be able to please you if I were blind and deaf and missing an arm.”

“I admit that I likewise want to be familiar with your person. I suppose, then, that we ought to practice.”

Darcy’s eyes grew dark, and Elizabeth laughed as he pulled her closer to his body than she already was.

The Darcys spent the week they had in town alone together in absolute paradise. Darcy was adamant in informing his staff that that no caller would be allowed to enter Darcy House under any circumstance that did not involve Georgiana or a death in the family. Therefore, they were able to avoid a confrontation with Lady Catherine, who had travelled to town to berate her nephew and try to get his marriage annulled. She had left Darcy yet another unforgiving note that he promptly burned, but it was mostly the Earl who had to deal with her, as she had went to him after being turned away from

Darcy House. The comforts Elizabeth gave Darcy were enough to make him forget about his aunt within seconds and return to the blissful existence he had with Elizabeth.

Meanwhile at the Hurst townhouse, Mr. Hurst picked up the morning paper and nearly choked on his breakfast when he read that a Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was recently wed to a Miss Elizabeth Bennet – the very same Miss Elizabeth Bennet whom his brother-in-law had wanted to marry. Not to mention that his sister-in-law wanted to marry Mr. Darcy for years. Hurst grimaced. He was not like Bingley, who wanted peace for the sake of peace. He wanted peace, because he liked to drink, and when he drank, loud noises usually bothered him. Without a doubt, his sister-in-law would be a painful harpy to deal with once she heard of the Darcys' marriage, and if Bingley was not infuriated by the betrayal of his closest friend, he would be a weeping mess. Hurst did not want to witness that.

"Good morning. It seems that we won't be seeing Darcy much over the course of our stay in town," said Bingley, entering the breakfast room, looking more dejected than he had appeared all week, which in itself spoke volumes.

Hurst froze. Was he too late? Was Bingley already aware of Darcy's duplicity? Goodness, would *he* be the one Bingley turned to now for troubles, including the debacle that Darcy created? He did not want that! Why did Darcy not simply wait for Bingley to fall in love with another before marrying the lady?

Bingley continued, "When I returned to town a week ago, he had left me a note telling me to meet with him as soon as possible, but when I went to his townhouse, he was not there. I meant to leave a note of my own, but I admit I was too distracted by my own feelings to do so. I finally remembered to try calling again today, but the butler said Darcy would not be available until he returns from Pemberley in a few months."

"He is to go to Pemberley?" asked Hurst, holding his breath. "Did he say why?"

"No, but something must have happened for him to travel there in this weather. It must have been why he wanted to meet with me so urgently. I hope nothing bad has befallen, but if there are problems, Darcy will surely fix it."

"I see." Hurst breathed out in relief. "Will you write to him?"

"I already did, telling him to not work himself to death too much, and that I am available to help him with anything, if need be. Though, I also told him he is in no pressure to write back; Darcy hates reading my illegible letters, and I must say that I do not enjoy writing them. I

much prefer my communications to be face to face," said Bingley.

"I comprehend it completely. Your handwriting is the worst I have ever seen."

"That is exactly what Darcy says to me all the time."

When Bingley's back was turned, Hurst stood up and threw the morning's paper into the open fire.

"Say, Bingley, I am thinking of visiting my family."

"You and Louisa are certainly due a visit."

"Will you and Caroline accompany with us?"

"I do not see why not. Caroline will be sad to miss the activities in town, but there will be plenty to do in the country."

"We shall leave first thing tomorrow morning, then," said Hurst. He hoped that before then, no word would get to Bingley, Caroline, and his wife about Darcy's marriage. Once they were away from town, it would be less likely for them to hear of it, and less likely that he would have to put up with both Bingley's and Caroline's woes at once. He hoped that during their stay with his family, Bingley would fall in love with another pretty lady. It would increase the chances of him forgiving his friend for his marriage, and Hurst wanted Bingley to remain on good terms with Darcy, who had a nice estate and a talented cook.

A day later, after the Hursts and Bingleys left town, a letter arrived at the Hurst townhouse, to Mr. Bingley from Mr. Darcy. If the Hursts had hired better help, or if Mr. Hurst had been a more organised man, the thick enveloped would have been redirected to the travelling party. Alas, the letter was placed on Mr. Hurst's desk, to be forgotten until he and his family returned from their trip.

The day of Mr. Collins and Mary's wedding came, yet there was little happiness to be found in the early morning. When Darcy and Elizabeth arrived at Longbourn, along with Georgiana, they were met with uproar.

"My dear Mrs. Darcy!" cried Mrs. Bennet, running to Elizabeth, Kitty and Lydia trailing behind her with smelling salts. "We are ruined!"

"What do you mean, mama? Where are Jane and Mary?"

"Jane is trying to comfort my poor, poor Mary! Oh, it is a good thing that you are married and will save us, for none of the other girls will ever be now that Mr. Collins has jilted Mary!" Mrs. Bennet burst into sobs.

"Mr. Collins *what*?" The Darcys were shocked. Elizabeth and Darcy were thankful when Mrs. Gardiner appeared and took Georgiana away from the chaos.

“Oh Mrs. Darcy, it is terrible! I knew Mr. Bennet should not have allowed Mr. Collins any chance to reconcile with our family, for he is as dreadful as his father was – no, he is even *more* dreadful than his father ever was! The odious man left a letter saying that he could not marry Mary, that Lady Catherine came to him yesterday saying that she forbids the marriage! I do not know why she would ever object – oh, I *knew* that of all my daughters, Mary had the least chance of getting married! If only she were not so plain, then Mr. Collins might not have jilted her! Now our neighbours will ridicule us! We are ruined here! My dear Mrs. Darcy, you must take us to hide away in your grand estate up north!”

Darcy stepped forward. “I am grieved. That my aunt would take such action, and that Mr. Collins would listen – it is insupportable. Do not fret, madam. I will offer my assistance in finding Mr. Collins.”

As Mrs. Bennet cried out her thanks, Darcy enveloped Elizabeth in a hug. He wiped away the tears that were starting to form in her eyes. “Do not worry, my love. I will find Mr. Collins.”

“Oh, Fitzwilliam, what you must think of my family.”

“I am more enraged at my aunt. She has clearly acted in retaliation to the news of our marriage.”

“You will be safe riding?” asked Elizabeth, tightening her grip on him.

“I will,” he promised. Not caring that her family was present, for the chaos in the room was too great for anyone to think about his actions, he bent down to kiss Elizabeth. Then, he was on his horse, the letter from Mr. Collins to the Bennets with him. Similar to how Mr. Collins went on long digressions while talking, he had written many off-topic things in his note, all of which were useless and had no reference to his whereabouts. Darcy only hoped that he would be able to locate him in under an hour.

It turned out to be surprisingly easy to find Mr. Collins, who was in the first inn Darcy entered in Meryton. Briefly, he wondered how Mr. Bennet had not yet found the man. By the time Mr. Bennet finally arrived alongside Mr. Gardiner, Darcy had already convinced Mr. Collins to attend his own wedding. He was content to see that, at least, Mr. Bennet was extremely angry at the man.

“How much do I owe you?” asked Mr. Bennet in a low, strained voice to Darcy as Mr. Collins gathered his belongings, diligently watched by Mr. Gardiner.

“I did not need money to persuade him to wed.” Truthfully, Darcy was surprised himself. He had been prepared to bargain with several thousand pounds or a living in Derbyshire, but Mr. Collins had only needed to be firmly talked to. When Darcy had questioned the man’s principles and reminded him that by spurning the Bennets he would

be spurning the Darcys, Mr. Collins listened. "I will stay here with Gardiner to make sure he makes it to the church. You should inform Elizabeth and the others that they should proceed with the wedding. If, however, Miss Mary is no longer inclined to marry Mr. Collins, then there is no need to go through with it. A small scandal will mean nothing when she weds another, perhaps more steadfast, man."

Mr. Bennet seemed confused at Darcy's thoughtful consideration. "Thank you," he finally said. "My wife and I, and Mary, cannot be more grateful."

"I did not do it for you or your family," stated Darcy. "I did it for Elizabeth."

Mr. Bennet eyed him for a moment, after which he spoke, "We are your family, if you will accept us. I should have given you my blessing when you asked for Elizabeth's hand, and can only hope for your approval when I tell you that I am giving you my blessing now."

"Thank you," Darcy said simply, his stoic mien unreadable.

It was clear to Mr. Bennet that his son-in-law would not say more, but as Darcy was never the one to speak much anyway, he was not so disappointed.

To everyone's relief, the wedding ceremony and breakfast thereafter went smoothly enough. Mary was evidently miffed at Mr. Collins, but she was happier to be married to the heir of Longbourn than not. Word did not get out about her near-jilt, so the neighbours were somewhat confused when Mrs. Bennet loudly proclaimed her thanks to Darcy at one point during the wedding breakfast. "You have saved us all!" Mrs. Bennet cried, and her neighbours made the conclusion that Darcy had made arrangements so that the Bennets were taken cared for after Mr. Bennet's death. Darcy actually did have a plan if Mr. Bennet were to die, and it certainly involved finding a place in Hertfordshire, for he knew he and Elizabeth could not bear living with Mrs. Bennet for a prolonged period.

Saving Elizabeth's family from scandal did have its perks, Darcy thought as Elizabeth sneaked him away during the wedding celebrations to show him her appreciation in a most loving, passionate manner.

"How is it that I fall even more in love with you every passing moment?" asked Elizabeth, resting her head on his chest. "You have saved my family from great disappointment and gossip."

"It was no trouble. I did it for you, my dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth."

"I cannot thank you enough." Elizabeth kissed him deeply, then sighed when she broke away. "I fear for Mary's happiness in Kent."

"I am of the mind to cut ties with my aunt. She has insulted us enough, and if she upsets you even further by mistreating your sister, I may intervene and seek Mr. Collins a living elsewhere while they stay

in one of our properties.”

“Oh, that will not be necessary. I believe my father has opened Longbourn’s doors to Mary whenever she is in need of respite. He would rather not welcome Mr. Collins, but he needs to learn how to manage the estate anyhow before his death.” Elizabeth glanced at Darcy and teased, “Why do appear so relieved? Do you not want to welcome Mr. Collins into our own home?”

“Shall we offer them a permanent apartment at Pemberley?”

“You would not dare.”

“Pemberley has over one hundred rooms. They could live there for a year and our own daily comings and goings would not be disrupted,” said Darcy. “But for your sake, Mrs. Darcy, we will not give them such an invitation.”

There was a knock on the door, followed by some giggles.

“Lizzy!” cried who was assuredly Lydia on the other side of the door. “Oh! Or I should say, Mrs. Darcy, as mama likes to call you now!”

There was a new round of giggling.

“Mary – I should call her Mary still, not Mrs. Collins, for being married to Mr. Collins is such an embarrassing thing – is leaving soon, and Mr. Collins would like to take his leave of the great Darcys!” continued Lydia.

“You are in there, are you not, Lizzy?” asked Kitty.

“Mr. Darcy is in there too? With Eliza?” whispered Maria Lucas.

“Of course they are in there! I suppose she did not marry so dull a man after all!” exclaimed Lydia. The girls giggled some more.

Elizabeth, who had by then righted herself and her husband, opened the door and, with surprise, found Georgiana blushing heavily besides the other girls. Elizabeth exclusively chided the troublemakers, separating them from poor Georgiana, for making so much ruckus.

“I am not the one alone in your old bedroom with a man,” said Lydia, before she skipped away with Kitty and Maria, laughing.

Elizabeth apologised profusely to Georgiana, who was not at all offended and even tried to make her own apologies.

“We will leave soon after the Collins,” Elizabeth promised Georgiana. “It would be good for us to reach the inn before nightfall.”

As Mr. Collins showered Darcy with so abundant an amount of praises that people would have thought he was speaking to Lady Catherine herself, Elizabeth was saying her goodbyes to her families and friends.

“Thank you for giving Fitzwilliam and I your blessing,” Elizabeth said to her father as she hugged him.

“He is a good man,” stated Mr. Bennet. “I do not doubt that he treats you well.”

“Pemberley and its library will always be open to you. I will write to you describing its virtues; Fitzwilliam is very proud of it, and he rarely exaggerates.”

“Be safe on your journey, my little Lizzy.”

Jane’s goodbye was a little less satisfying.

“Are you certain you do not want to join us at Pemberley?” Elizabeth asked her sister.

Jane shook her head. “I do not want to impose on you and Mr. Darcy.”

“You will not impose at all. Georgiana is coming with us, and with Mrs. Annesley on leave to spend time with her family, she may enjoy the extra company.”

“It is different, Lizzy. Pemberley is Miss Darcy’s home.”

“You are our sister too, Jane.”

“Mama will need me here, with you and Mary gone,” Jane insisted.

“Very well,” conceded Elizabeth. “Though, I think that papa will need you more than she.”

The carriage ride to Pemberley was arduous in the cold weather. Lengthy as the travel spanned, Darcy and Georgiana, unable to wait for Elizabeth to see the estate, were not able to fit it even half of the tales they wanted to tell her of their most beloved home. Elizabeth listened with great diligence, and the days passed by relatively quickly.

When they made it to Derbyshire and Darcy stopped the carriage so Elizabeth could see Pemberley at its highest advantage, she could scarcely believe how marvelous the estate was. It overflowed in natural beauty, and anything sculpted by man was implemented in great taste. She said as much to Darcy and Georgiana, who beamed at her.

“All this I will be mistress of!” cried Elizabeth, surveying the vast land. “You have not warned me enough. I feel a bit overwhelmed.”

“What is there to warn? You will be the best mistress Pemberley has ever seen,” stated Darcy. Georgiana nodded in agreement.

“You are precipitous,” said Elizabeth, smiling at the two before resuming her previous state of awe. She was unable to take her eyes off of her new home.

Darcy and Georgiana were right; Elizabeth immediately fit in Pemberley as though she had been born and raised there. The sight of her in the groves, the gardens, the library, the entrance hall – Darcy knew that Elizabeth was Pemberley’s perfect mistress.

The more familiar Elizabeth became with Pemberley, the more she fell in love with it and its owner. One of her favourite pastimes was listening to the longtime housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, speak of Darcy as a child. Another was exploring Pemberley’s endless grounds with

Darcy or Georgiana. Yet another was going to the gallery room and staring at Darcy's portrait, especially when he was busy working with his steward. Darcy caught her in that particular activity one time, to his great amusement.

"And you wonder why I am so proud," said he. "How can I not be, when you seek out my portrait so?"

"You assume too much. I could be looking at you to find fault."

Darcy laughed. "My love, when your portraits are done, I will stare at them all the time, and then *your* vanity may reach the clouds."

"My portraits?"

"I have arranged them to be made. There will be some of us together, and then many of you. If I had it my way, I would fill this entire gallery with your face, your figure, your eyes."

Darcy's claim that there could be no better mistress of Pemberley than Elizabeth proved more correct the more time went on. Elizabeth Darcy simply belonged there. Even the staff commented to themselves how she was destined to its mistress, and the applause they gave her when her official portrait was unveiled was so loud that it seemed like it could have been heard five miles away in Lambton. Grand and beautiful as Pemberley has always been, it had for the longest time a dreary glow to it, until Elizabeth came and gave it colour. Laughter was now heard throughout the halls, including that of Mr. Darcy's. Song now joined alongside Georgiana's playing. Trails in the woods and paths in the gardens were reopened, as well as many rooms that had been collecting dust over the years. One of the rooms that was to be remodeled was the nursery.

"Can it be too soon? Can I really be with child?" Elizabeth asked Mrs. Reynolds two months after her marriage. She had written to her aunt about her suppositions, but wanted the opinion of someone who could physically see her. Although Mrs. Reynolds had no children of her own, she was a wise woman, and Elizabeth trusted her completely on all matters.

"It is not too soon, though you will not know for sure until later, and it is best for you to see a physician. In the meantime, it is never too early to start prepping the nursery," said Mrs. Reynolds, trying to hide a smile. Without a doubt, the housekeeper wanted to be alive to witness the next generation of Darcys. Hearing Elizabeth sigh, she sought to comfort her. "If I may say so, Mrs. Darcy, I know you will be an excellent mother."

"Thank you, Mrs. Reynolds, but it is not that. In fact, I am quite excited to be a mother. I am from a large family, and would like many children myself," said Elizabeth. "I only worry for Mr. Darcy."

"Oh dear. I understand your sentiments. It was most unfortunate what had led to Lady Anne's passing." Mr. Darcy's mother had many

complicated births and miscarriages, and it was likely that the aftereffects of childbirth had played a large part in her death. It was not unthinkable that Mr. Darcy would worry that the same fate would befall his wife.

“When we spoke of children before, he told me his concerns, and I told him that my mother bore five daughters without any problems at all,” continued Elizabeth. “We will see how he reacts when I tell him my suppositions. Let us hope that he will not be too fretful, but in case it does not go well, we shall have his favourite foods at dinner tonight.”

Darcy reacted to the tentative news just as Elizabeth had thought he would. First, he was incredibly happy. He picked her up and spun her around, thanking her and telling her that he loved her. Then, he began to overthink, and turned very, very anxious. He hugged Elizabeth tight to him again, but out of fear for her health instead of carefree joy.

“Fitzwilliam, I will be fine. If I inherited one thing from my mother, it is her good health,” assured Elizabeth.

“You will be fine,” he agreed, but he held her close still. “You must be.”

“You must not worry. I will not leave you and Georgiana alone.”

“You will not. I forbid it.”

They did not move from their embrace for a great while. Then, Elizabeth said, “It has been thirty minutes, Fitzwilliam. We cannot be standing here like this all day.”

Darcy released her, but still held her hand and waist as he walked with her to the music room, as if he needed the assurance that she was alive and well.

A few days later, Darcy and Elizabeth decided to plan a trip back to London. They were to spend a few months there, before going to Hertfordshire for Easter, Darcy’s annual spring trip to Kent foregone due to his falling out with his aunt. Then, they would return to Pemberley, where the air would be much better, and where Elizabeth would have her lying in.

Chapter 14

“You have a letter from Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth said to her husband on their third day in town. She had just walked into Darcy’s study with a pile of missives.

“Oh.”

“That is all you have to say?”

“I will read it later.”

“Mr. Darcy,” said Elizabeth. She had a habit of calling her husband Mr. Darcy in his study. “You have seldom spoken of your dearest friend since our marriage.”

“We rarely correspond while we are apart. His handwriting is atrocious, and he does not like writing anyhow.”

“So there is no trouble between the two of you? Is he happy that we are wed?”

“I do not know.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean, you do not know?”

“The morning our marriage was first announced in the papers, I sent him a letter explaining how we came to be married, and that I was sorry for not informing him beforehand. He replied saying that he would go with Hurst to visit his family, but he spoke nothing of our marriage.”

“Mr. Darcy!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “Why did you not tell him before it was in the papers?”

Darcy spoke without remorse, “I wanted to tell him in person, but he did not respond to my request for a meeting until after our marriage. I had waited for him to, and the closer it got to the date of our nuptials, the less I felt inclined to push the matter. We were too overwhelmed with the planning and both of our families, and though I did write the letter then, I did not send it until later. I did not want to deal with a response mirroring Lady Catherine’s, though in retrospect, it would not have mattered. He has nothing to say at all about our marriage.”

“If I were him,” said Elizabeth, “I would have been vexed to find out that my best friend did not tell me such important news sooner! If he is indeed mad at you, and I believe that he is, I would not blame him.”

“He cannot be so mad. While he did not congratulate me, he did not speak ill of me either.”

“When you open his letter, I would not be surprised if he has written terrible things about you.”

To prove Elizabeth wrong, Darcy broke off the seal and read the letter. There was no sign of resentment, much to his satisfaction. He handed over the letter to Elizabeth so she could read it herself.

“I now understand why you do not write to each other often. You must tell me if I have comprehended him correctly,” she said, staring at the large blots of ink. “He only says that he is enjoying furthering his acquaintance with Mr. Hurst’s family, but that he misses town, and will return soon. Only, he does not know the exact date, but when he does return, he hopes to see you. Then, he mentions something about Pemberley in the summer.”

“Bingley and I always have plans to stay at Pemberley a few weeks in the summer. You see, he does not resent me. He is excited to join us in a few months.”

“He also says that he greatly admires one of the local ladies! That is good news!”

“Read on, my dear.”

“Oh.” Bingley had proceeded to write about how he had thought he could accept the lady’s awful singing, yet not a month had passed before all of his attraction had waned.

“It is a first, at least, that he was the one to realize the incompatibility,” said Darcy. “Hurst was even trying to push for the match. Bingley is maturing, to be sure, and I am glad that he seems to have moved on from you.”

“Will you write back to him?”

“He is likely on the way to town by now. When Hurst’s house reopens, I will call.”

“Is it strange that he does not mention me once?”

“I suppose it is a little odd, but Bingley has always been a terrible correspondent. I would not think much of it.”

“As you say, my dear husband. Now, I believe that you have worked too hard this morning – almost as much as I have, embroidering a single cushion. I must insist that you relax with me.”

The first public town outing Mr. and Mrs. Darcy attended was wildly whispered about. Though they had married months ago, Mrs. Darcy was still yet to be seen at an event, and she especially provoked great interest. As the couple entered the theatre, Mrs. Darcy’s face, figure, dress, posture, voice and everything else observable was scrutinized and discussed. Those who had wanted Mr. Darcy for themselves or their family tried to criticise his bride, but the general consensus was that Mrs. Darcy was a jewel that he had plucked from some unknown countryside. Most were surprised that Mr. Darcy chose a lively bride who loved to laugh, and even more astonished when

word got around that Mrs. Darcy brought to her marriage neither fortune nor connections. Nonetheless, Mrs. Darcy was handsome, and for many that was a sufficient explanation as to why Mr. Darcy would marry her.

"You look just as you did when I first saw you at the assembly in Meryton," Elizabeth told her husband as they walked to their box.

"And how did I appear?" asked Darcy.

"Very miserable."

Darcy was offended.

"Yes, exactly like that. My dear, you should not look so dour. They will think that you have already regretted our marriage."

"That is preposterous. I will never regret marrying you. I have never been happier than I have been with you," said Darcy, smiling at Elizabeth.

"There is the handsome smile I love! I warn you, Fitzwilliam, that I will make it my goal to have you smile at least fifty times like that this evening."

Elizabeth did just that over the course of the play. Many people in the theatre were astounded to see Mr. Darcy's teeth, and to witness him laughing on occasion with his wife. The evening at the theatre was, on the whole, a success.

In general, the *ton* seemed to have accepted Elizabeth into their society. Sociable as she was, she was able to easily make friends with some of her new neighbours, including some ladies of highly respectable families. Some families may have sought her out as easy prey for a connection with the Darcys and Fitzwilliams, but once they knew her better, they were won over. Their inclusion of her in their circles paved the way for the approval of some of her husband's relations.

"Nephew," spoke Lord Matlock during a short call, "I must say that your wife has proven herself. If only you were as sociable and likable as she."

"I have always admired her amiability. If only you had seen her merits before," said Darcy.

"Yes, well, you cannot fault me for being critical. Your marriage came out of nowhere. But that is all in the past, and we will be glad to have you and your wife dine with us in two days."

"We are to attend the opera in two days."

"That is well! We will attend the same show, and you must sit with us in our box."

Darcy accepted the invitation, and two days later at the opera, he was walking alongside Elizabeth amidst the crowd. Elizabeth was dressed to be displayed, and so distracted was Darcy as he admired his glowing wife that he was caught off guard when another party walked

up to them.

“Darcy!” cried Bingley, looking very mortified. Next to him were the equally mortified Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst, and Mr. Hurst. Bingley and his sisters glanced back and forth between Darcy and Elizabeth with great confusion. Hurst let out a loud sigh and plucked a drink off of a nearby staff’s serving tray, but none paid attention to him.

“Darcy?” repeated Bingley. His eyes, rounded and full of disbelief, settled on Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet?”

Darcy and Elizabeth stiffened at the usage of Elizabeth’s former name. Both grew as mortified as the people before them as they quickly realised that Bingley did not know of their marital status.

Whispers started rising in the room as others recognised the brewing of a confrontation, or at least an interaction worthy of being gossiped about.

“Elizabeth is no longer Miss Bennet,” Darcy finally said. He spoke proudly, and with no guilt. “She has been, for over two months, Mrs. Darcy.”

The statement was not surprising, given how Darcy and Elizabeth had been strolling about the theatre looking very much like the married couple they were, but to have it said aloud in confirmation was disturbing enough for Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst to gasp.

“How can you – how can it be?” cried Bingley. “You said she was engaged to another!”

“It must be a misunderstanding. Mrs. Darcy has never been engaged to anyone but me.”

“But it is impossible. You did not know each other before your coming to Hertfordshire with me. And when we were there, you knew that *I* was...” Bingley could not finish the sentence with Elizabeth near. “I do not understand how you became engaged!”

“Charles,” Miss Bingley intervened, “the performance is about to start. Mr. Darcy, Eliza, we give our congratulations. And we must have tea again, Eliza. It has been far too long.”

“Yes, it has,” said Elizabeth.

“Then I shall see you soon for that.” Miss Bingley was absolutely horrified that Elizabeth had somehow managed to become the mistress of Pemberley, but she was smart enough to know that it would be to her advantage if she were to treat Elizabeth with the highest civility. She wished that her brother would stop making a fool of himself; he would need a stern talking to later, for she could not accept it if his friendship with Darcy suffered. How terrible would it be, if there were to be a breach! They would be laughed at, for sure, and would never be able to see Pemberley again. It was not to be borne. Yet, her brother did not appear to understand that, and she had to practically drag him away from the Darceys and to their seats.

“How did you not know that Mr. Darcy married?” she seethed at her brother.

“He did not tell me!”

“He told you that she was engaged! You mean to tell me that he did not tell *you*, his closest friend, that he was talking about himself?!”

“I am as shocked as you are.” Bingley ran a hand through his hair. “I cannot believe it. I told him I was planning on proposing, and he never told me that he intended to marry her as well. How can Darcy do such a thing?”

“You imbecile!”

“Caroline!”

“It does not matter, I suppose. He is married, and there is nothing more we can do. You must endeavour to forgive him!”

“Caroline is right, Charles. Of all your friends, Mr. Darcy is the one with the highest standing. You cannot have a better friend than him for that reason alone,” added Mrs. Hurst.

“I had *thought* that before,” said Bingley, “but I am beginning to think otherwise.”

“Perhaps,” Miss Bingley said in a whisper, “Eliza had compromised him. That would explain Mr. Darcy’s silence about his engagement and marriage.”

Bingley was appalled at the suggestion. “Elizabeth would never have done such a thing! And Darcy was *not* silent. He had said, very clearly, that the gentleman who was engaged to Elizabeth loves her, and would not be refused her hand! It sounds to me that *he* went after her. That he would mislead me, that he would pursue the woman I love – I cannot be more befuddled. It is too much.”

“Charles, you must keep it down,” said Mrs. Hurst, nervously looking at the growing stares they were receiving.

“Forgive me; I am unwell.”

Caroline said through gritted teeth, “It is a shock, I know, but you must get past it. There are plenty of other ladies for you to get to know better, with greater fortune and connections than Eliza had. Now, you must at least pretend to look interested in the performance. It will not do for you to look like a depressed donkey the entire evening.”

Bingley did indeed look disconsolate the rest of the night. He hardly stared at the stage, and instead was seen staring half wistfully and half dejectedly at the Darcys. He saw that while Darcy did not look so happy either, he seemed considerably calmer every time Elizabeth laid a comforting hand on him. His heart constricted at the sight.

Over at the Earl of Matlock’s box, Darcy was questioned by his aunt after she returned from the first intermission. “Why am I hearing rumours that you had stolen Elizabeth away from your best friend?”

Darcy sighed and stated, "I did no such thing. I did not steal Elizabeth from anyone. She never would have married Bingley." Elizabeth placed her hand in his and nodded in agreement.

At home, however, Elizabeth had no qualms doing her own questioning. "Why was Mr. Bingley unaware of our marriage?"

Darcy sighed. "I do not know. I had thought he knew."

"But you said you had sent him a letter."

"He must not have read it."

"Oh, Fitzwilliam," said Elizabeth, wrapping her arms around him. "This is quite the predicament."

Darcy held Elizabeth close. "You are not rebuking me?"

"My love, you will be punished enough in your next meeting with Bingley. Unless he is so kind that he instantly forgives you, but I cannot imagine that. I know Charlotte would be more than furious with me if I never told her I was engaged, let alone married."

"Bingley has always encouraged peace. There may be hope for me."

"He is much like Jane, then," observed Elizabeth. "The two of them are the most kind-hearted people I have ever known. What do you think of them together?"

"You are starting to sound like your scheming mother. Should I be worried?"

Elizabeth was offended. "I dearly love to laugh, Mr. Darcy, but that jest is uncalled for!"

"I am sorry," Darcy apologised, laughing as he kissed Elizabeth's forehead. He placed a hand on her stomach. "How are you feeling, my Lizzy?"

"I am well." Elizabeth smiled, her annoyance gone. Thinking of the life growing inside her always made her happy. "Though I am a little tired."

"Come, then. Let us sleep, and sort out everything tomorrow," said Darcy, leading them to their bed.

The next day, Darcy made the effort to pay the long overdue call to Bingley. When he went to the Hurst residence, however, his friend was not there.

"He is at the club," said Hurst, smelling so strongly of alcohol that it was amazing he was awake.

Darcy thanked Hurst for the knowledge and proceeded to track down his friend. He found him taking on a fencing opponent with terrifying vigor.

"Darcy!" exclaimed Bingley, but instead of being distracted, he doubled his efforts against his opponent and won the match. After shaking hands with the losing man, he tossed a foil at Darcy.

Darcy caught the weapon but said, "Bingley, we need to speak."

"You have had over two months to do that," said Bingley, readying his stance.

"Bingley, I'm sorry, but I had sent you a letter months ago –"

"I did not get it, but it does not matter. Are you such a coward that you could not speak to me directly about Miss Elizabeth?"

Irritated at the address, Darcy accepted the match. "She is Mrs. Darcy now."

"For how long has it been, exactly?" asked Bingley. He was on the offence, while Darcy moved to defend against the strikes. "No, never mind that. How long ago was it when you decided to steal the woman I love from me?"

"Oho, so that is what happened between you two!" exclaimed a gentleman watching from the sidelines.

"I thought my wife was mad when she told me that you two made a scene at the opera yesterday!" said another.

They, along with the other tittering men who had walked over to see the fuss, were aptly ignored by the fencers.

"I did not steal her from you. Elizabeth would have never married you," stated Darcy.

"You knew that I loved her!"

"She did not love you!"

Bingley faltered, but Darcy did not take the opportunity to strike, preferring to settle things with conversation in private. After a second, however, Bingley became even more enraged than before, and the match continued with newfound aggression on both sides. "She could not have fallen in love with you in Hertfordshire."

"Perhaps not," replied Darcy, "but when I saw her in town weeks later –"

"In town? How did she come to be in town?" Bingley aimed a close attack, but Darcy managed to deflect it. "Did you fall in love with her while she was in London?"

"My affections took root before then."

"But you did not have an understanding with her when we were in Hertfordshire."

"No."

"And when you told me that she was soon to be engaged – did you have an understanding with her then?"

"I did not. However, I knew I would propose to her soon."

"You had purposely hidden her whereabouts from me, so you could pursue her without competition!" cried Bingley. He let out a disgruntled shout as Darcy managed to get a point on him.

"I will say it again. Elizabeth would have never married you," said Darcy. "There was no competition."

"You cannot completely believe that. You would not have hidden her from me in the first place, if you believed that."

"I admit that I was at first unsure of her feelings. However, when I saw her in town, she said that she would only marry for love and that she did not love you."

"No thanks to your actions. How could I expect her to think well of me when you isolated her from me? We were getting on well in Hertfordshire. She danced and smiled with me far more than she did with you. Why, she argued with you more often than not! I do not even think she liked you then. Her family certainly did not, and I daresay they were hoping for me to propose to her. Yet I was not able to, because you told me that she was engaged when she was not. I even went back to Hertfordshire for her –"

"You *what*?"

"– but instead she most likely thought that I had ignored her! Because of you, I was not given the chance to earn her lo–"

"She saw you on the street, and ran away to hide from you in the nearest shop," said Darcy with no little cruelty.

"Was this before or after you bribed her with your large estate? Did you mention your income? Perhaps you emphasized that you are the grandson of an earl?"

Incensed, Darcy ignored Bingley and continued, "She did not want to see you so much that she hid from you! That is not the action of a woman who wants to be in love with you, Bingley. You never had a chance with Elizabeth, because she did not want to give you it, and it is all well, because she is Mrs. Darcy now. She is exceedingly happy to be Mrs. Darcy, happy to be the mistress of Pemberley and all of my properties, happy to love me, and happy to be carrying my heir!"

Bingley's foil fell to the ground. Disarmed by Darcy, he could do nothing but accept the defeat. "Thank you, Darcy, for your thorough explanation," said he. Never had anyone heard such bitter sarcasm come from him. "You beat me, as always."

"Jealousy does not look good on you."

"Jealousy! If only it were just that!" spat Bingley. "You are a man who has betrayed my trust and friendship. To not tell me that you were to marry, to pursue the woman you knew I love, and to not even show an ounce of remorse for it! I can never forgive that."

"I see," said Darcy, calmly putting the fencing accessories away. "Thank you, then, for your time."

With that, Darcy walked out of the club, and Bingley was left to be bombarded by the spectating gentlemen.

Darcy was grateful to have a wife so in tune to his emotions. Elizabeth knew that his visit to Bingley had gone horribly wrong, and sought to comfort him.

“He is incorrigible,” spoke Darcy, pacing the floor as Elizabeth poured some drinks. “Completely incorrigible. He believes that he had a chance with you! That you only married me for my wealth and connections!”

“Fitzwilliam, my love,” soothed Elizabeth, guiding Darcy to his favourite chair. She ran her fingers through his hair. “You are both shocked and upset, and likely regretful of many of the things you have said.”

“I am through with him. After all I have done for him – I have helped him with his estate, his business, and my association with him has obviously elevated his social rank. Then he proceeds to repay me with incivility! He did not even bother to have a private discussion. The amount of fools who overheard our conversation was insupportable.”

“I know you are angry, but you cannot speak so!” chided Elizabeth. “You cannot truly think that Mr. Bingley is your inferior.”

“I believe just that. The Darcys and Pemberley have been of high standing for many generations past, and on my mother’s side, I am the grandson of an earl! What is Bingley but a rich tradesman’s son,” ranted Darcy.

“Bingley is your equal. He is a gentleman, the same as you.”

“And a knight is equal to a footman!”

“And what am I? Bingley has a rank that is miles above my own. Do you think me inferior to you as well?”

“Of course I do not. You are Mrs. Darcy now,” Darcy said simply.

“I was Miss Bennet once.”

“You cannot deny that your status has elevated after you married me.”

Elizabeth stopped her caresses. Her eyes flashed with anger. “And those are the words of a gentleman! I do not know why you married me if you thought me so beneath yourself! What think you of Aunt and Uncle Gardiner? They are in trade, still. Does that make you think terribly less of them? Do you think you are so superior?”

Darcy flinched. Her rebuke triggered a moment of clarity, and soon, he became appalled at himself for his way of thinking, and distraught that he upset the person he loved most in the world. “Elizabeth, my dear, I apologise. I do not truly think that I am above you, or your relations for that matter.”

“You had thought it enough to say it aloud.”

“It is a misunderstanding. I did not realise how arrogant I sounded until your rebuke.” When Elizabeth did not reply, he continued to say, “You know I am not the best at conversing when I am upset. But you must know, surely you must know, that I have the highest opinion of you. Even before you became Mrs. Darcy, I thought you were *my*

superior. I may have thought that my wealth was to my advantage, and that it would be good for you that you would want for nothing, but mostly I thought that I did not deserve you."

"Fitzwilliam, you are a foolish man." Elizabeth sighed, but went to sit on Darcy's lap. She cuddled close to him, leaning her head on his broad chest. "You have explained yourself well, so I forgive you."

"Thank you, my love."

Before Darcy could kiss Elizabeth, she stopped him with a finger on his lips. "Now, you must sometime in the future communicate with your Mr. Bingley as you did with me, and seek *his* forgiveness."

"You are right, of course, but I will have no enjoyment trying to make things right with Bingley. My hopes are not the best; he says that he will never forgive me," said Darcy, playing with Elizabeth's hair.

"I am sure he did not mean that. Most likely, he only needs time for his anger to melt away. He will miss you soon enough, for your company is quite irreplaceable. In the meantime, I suggest you write him another letter. Your letters are always very nice and eloquent, and though he berated you on your lack of direct speech, I think that if he received your letter in the first place, he would never have gotten so angry at you. Truly, if you are ever inclined, you could make a business out of writing letters."

"I will take your advice."

"I am glad."

"I do not know what I would do without you," said Darcy, finally allowed to trail kisses over Elizabeth's face.

"Well, without me, you would be on perfect terms with your best friend."

"I love it when you tease me." Darcy placed a hand on Elizabeth's cheek so he could see her look at him with her sparkling dark eyes. He kissed her nose, then her lips. "I love you, Elizabeth Darcy. I am so happy that you love me, and that you chose to marry me."

"My love," Elizabeth murmured. She leaned into his kiss.

"I have had a very upsetting day," said Darcy, slowly caressing Elizabeth's waist.

"My poor Fitzwilliam. Let me comfort you."

"You love me," stated Darcy between kisses.

"I love you, Fitzwilliam. Only you." Elizabeth pushed her body closer to his as he pulled her nearer, and they let themselves forget about all of their troubles.

Chapter 15

Within days, word had gotten around town about Darcy's and Bingley's falling out. The general consensus was that Darcy had done his friend wrong, but as he was the more consequential person, he was forgiven. Bingley, on the other hand, was the subject of many unfavorable whispers. He was bandied about as an unfortunate fool, for both being cast aside by a lady and for carelessly ending his friendship with the master of Pemberley.

The feud between the men did not only affect themselves. Their family suffered through the gossip. Bingley's sisters were subtly-not-subtly laughed at wherever they went. Georgiana was thankfully not the subject of derision, but Elizabeth's name was even more frequently whispered than Darcy's or Bingley's. Her tentative approval from the *ton* quickly spiraled away. She was called a flirt, a social climber, and mercenary, among other things. Not even her new friends and family could keep the murmurs at bay; Darcy and Bingley's fencing match and their heated argument about her was too much of an amusing story to not be widely circulated.

The reveal of Elizabeth's pregnancy was especially heavily discussed. Speculations ran wild.

"They have only been married a little over two months," some had whispered.

"They cannot possibly know that she is with child so soon. I bet five pounds that the child will be born before they have been married nine months."

"Perhaps that is why Mr. Darcy married her."

"I heard the estate Mr. Bingley had let was only three miles from her father's."

"Do you think that they copulated right under Bingley's nose?"

"Mrs. Darcy certainly used her arts and allurements on her husband."

"She is a hoyden, for sure."

Word spread so rapidly that Elizabeth received letters from her mother, Jane, and Charlotte asking her why she did not tell them that she was with child.

"Fitzwilliam, why does everyone know that I might be carrying your heir?" Elizabeth questioned her husband at the breakfast table, her nose in one of the letters.

Darcy stilled. Coughing, he set down the paper he was reading. Of all days Georgiana had to be still abed... He cleared his throat. "In anger, I might have told Bingley that you were carrying my heir."

"Fitzwilliam!" Elizabeth was not a little vexed. "Was this during your encounter at the club? The encounter which you said a crowd of gentlemen witnessed?"

"I am sorry, my love."

"You know that it should not be announced so prematurely! Now we must deal with my mother knowing, and Jane and Charlotte are so disappointed that they did not find out from me. I was so excited to tell them as well. And what if I am not truly with child?"

"Oh, Elizabeth, I am so sorry," said Darcy, rising to hug her from behind her chair. "Please, tell me how I can make it better."

Elizabeth called him an insufferable man and reached for the paper he had been reading. Flipping to the sections dedicated to gossip and the like, she skimmed the page and was displeased to find what she thought, but had hoped not, was there. She read aloud, "If you have been reading our past issues, as you should, then you already know this shocking story: A newlywed couple expects a babe. D, master of a large northern estate and nephew of the Earl of M, had announced the news during a spar with his longtime friend B. B, who is in love with Mrs. D, did not take the news well."

Darcy took the paper from Elizabeth and read it himself. He cursed. "I have made a mess of things."

"You have. However, we must look on the brighter side. Your aunt and uncle have not ambushed us with questions yet, and speaking of your family, your favourite cousin the Colonel is returning home soon."

Darcy smiled. "Yes, I am excited for you two to finally meet. He and you are of similar temperament." Placing the paper down, Darcy returned his full attention to his wife. He placed a hand on her belly. "I think that we are certain that there is a babe in here."

"I think so as well," said Elizabeth, turning to kiss Darcy's chin. "Sit, Fitzwilliam, and let us prepare how to share our news with Georgiana when she comes down to break her fast. We must tell her before she finds out elsewhere, if she does not know already."

"She will be delighted. Shall we name her as the child's godmother?"

"That sounds like a splendid idea. I hope that Jane will not be too disappointed."

"She can be appointed that role for our next child."

"You are thinking too far ahead," Elizabeth chided with a laugh. She was glad that her husband's fear of her dying in childbirth had for the moment waned. Though the nearer she got to her lying in, she

thought with a grimace, the more likely he would return to being excruciatingly worried.

When Georgiana came down, she received their news with extreme joy.

“So that is why you are redecorating the nursery!” cried Georgiana. Darcy and Elizabeth had never seen her more enthusiastic. “Oh, I cannot wait to have a little niece or nephew. I will start embroidering little baby clothes. Do you think it will be a girl? Or a boy? It does not matter, I suppose. I will embroider so many things that the babe will have plenty of options for its dress.”

The next person to be informed was Darcy’s uncle, who was also very complimentary.

“Your wife did well,” said he to Darcy. “I admit, I had for some time feared you would never marry. You were never interested in any lady at all! I had thought Pemberley’s legacy would rely on Georgiana, but I am glad that my fears were for naught.”

“Pemberley and I were waiting for Elizabeth,” stated Darcy.

“Let us hope that she bears you a son.”

“Pemberley is not entailed.”

“Still, you should hope for a son.”

“Elizabeth came from a family of five daughters and no sons. I will be exceedingly happy whatever the gender of our child may be, as long as Elizabeth and the babe are healthy.”

Lady Catherine, whom the Darcys had not heard from since her last disparaging letter sent after Mr. Collins arrived in Kent married to Elizabeth’s sister, used the rumours about Elizabeth to criticise her even farther. She sent Darcy a missive directing him to seek an estrangement from his wife. This promptly led Darcy to seek a formal estrangement from his aunt instead, by the means of an equally vicious letter of his own. He had cut Lady Catherine in the past by ignoring her, but his recent anger towards her, which even exceeded his anger towards Bingley, made the scathing reply necessary.

Elizabeth was annoyed at the false insinuations against her, but the larger problem she considered was with her husband and Bingley. She knew that while Darcy had many acquaintances, he lacked friends, and was becoming a little lonely. He seemed happy enough; indeed, he was excited as ever, being with his true love every day and expecting a child. However, Elizabeth desired the ultimate happiness for him, and knew that it must include a reconciliation with the friend who had been by his side for years.

Not knowing what Bingley’s sisters thought of her, Elizabeth was unsure whether or not she should pay them a visit. She was just about to write a note to Miss Bingley when the lady herself, as well as her sister, were announced at the door. Elizabeth was never more

delighted to see Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, and graciously invited them into the drawing room. The sisters, too, seemed every bit as eager to be allowed entrance to Darcy House.

"We were very surprised at your marriage, but cannot be more pleased," said Miss Bingley after they were all seated and settled with tea. Mrs. Hurst nodded beside her.

Elizabeth doubted the truth of that statement, but knew that the Bingley sisters needed her as much as she needed them if they wanted Darcy and Bingley to repair their friendship. She thanked them for their sentiments.

"The table is very nice," observed Mrs. Hurst.

"Yes, the work done on it is beautiful."

"Was it a wedding gift?" asked Miss Bingley.

"No. It has been here since before I was born, I believe," said Elizabeth. A few polite exchanges later, she put down the cup she was holding, and decided to get to the root of things. "I hope I do not offend you when I say that I am sorry for what has happened between your brother and my husband."

"You do not offend!" Miss Bingley hurriedly assured. "It is an awful situation, is it not? They had been friends for so long! I am afraid that Charles has overreacted, and has said things that he did not truly mean."

"We cannot fault him for his emotions."

"You are too kind. Charles is known to be impulsive. I know that he will regret his response, and I only hope he will make amends before he pains himself too much."

"Indeed, I am as worried as you are for the gentlemen," said Elizabeth.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst appeared much relieved. The latter was then nudged by the former.

"Eliza, we must also apologise for another incident. We had written a note to you, before, that you now must know contained a small misunderstanding. We had hoped our brother was attached to Miss Darcy, but it is not so," confessed Mrs. Hurst.

They were instantly forgiven by Elizabeth, who told them that she had, in all truthfulness, forgotten about it. "I did not believe it anyhow," added she to the sisters' embarrassment.

"Has Mr. Darcy spoken about our brother?" asked Miss Bingley.

"He has."

The sisters looked expectantly at Elizabeth, hoping for more information.

"He did not take kindly to some of the fabrications circling around town," continued Elizabeth. Darcy had taken her advice and had written Bingley another letter, but enraged as he was when the *ton's*

insults against Elizabeth started reaching their ears, he did not send it. Elizabeth tried to persuade him to give Bingley the letter, but he was entirely too stubborn and faulted the man for the lies being spread about his wife.

"Yes, the falsehoods are completely unacceptable!" cried Miss Bingley. "We must put an end to them."

"Perhaps a new scandal will overtake the current talk."

"Eliza, you do not know town as we do. Gossip will stick to a person for years."

"It is the same as in the country, then."

"I am sure that those in Hertfordshire are more forgiving, but the *ton* can be quite merciless, especially to those of high standing." Miss Bingley gestured to herself, her sister, and Elizabeth. "You will see that I am right, the more you stay in town."

"Your insight must be grand indeed."

"We *are* familiar with the most influential circles."

"Tell me then; how do you suggest we combat these tales?"

"We must find a way for Charles and Mr. Darcy to restore their friendship," stated Miss Bingley. "Then, we must extend our own friendship beyond our houses. We must go on shopping excursions, attend the theatre together, and be seen together at balls."

"I am amenable to that, but what will your brother say about this friendship of ours?"

"He will not mind. He does not resent *you*."

"He should not, anyway. We had always told him that you were not for him," added Mrs. Hurst.

It turned out that although Bingley still thought kindly of Elizabeth, Darcy cared not for Elizabeth's association with Bingley's sisters.

"They have never been kind to you before," said Darcy to Elizabeth later that night, after she told him about her callers. "I never liked how they spoke of you in the past. The only reason why we would associate with them at all is because of their brother, but now that we have nothing to do with him, we do not have to be in the presence of his sisters. It is more of a blessing than anything."

"How bitter you sound! They might have been mean, but I was never as complimentary towards Caroline and Louisa either," replied Elizabeth, testing how their names sounded from her lips. She would need to get used to addressing them as such, given how they were to play the part of good friends until the men reconciled. As Darcy frowned, she continued, "I will be visiting some shops with them tomorrow."

"You are scheming, Elizabeth. You and Bingley's sisters want him and I to resolve our differences, but your efforts will be all for naught."

“You cannot live without at least one good friend.”

“I am quite content without him; you need not suffer through his sisters’ company for my sake.”

“I will not suffer. They were quite pleasant when they called today, at least compared to our previous visits, and there is some boldness in them that I respect. Nothing you say will keep me from being friends with them.” When Darcy sighed, Elizabeth poked him and said, “I am only as stubborn as you are.”

Darcy punished her impertinence with a kiss.

The next day, Elizabeth met with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst at a dressmaker’s shop. It was a reversal of circumstances, as Elizabeth was the one to be introducing the sisters to a well-known modiste. Elizabeth was also the only one out of the three fawned over. She was complimented every other sentence, to the annoyance of the Bingley sisters, who tried not to wrinkle their noses at their relative insignificance. Elizabeth dearly wished to laugh at them, but she knew she should not. Thus, she turned her attention to the modiste, who was trying to get her to buy more than she ought to, reasoning that there would be inevitable changes in her form as her pregnancy progressed.

“There has not yet been a formal announcement that Eliza is with child,” Miss Bingley stated after the subject was brought up a third time.

The defence surprised Elizabeth, and she began to think fonder of Miss Bingley. The more she treated the sisters with genuine regard, the more the sentiment was returned. So merry a party they became that by the time they left the modiste, every customer thereafter was treated with the story of how Mrs. Darcy, Miss Bingley, and Mrs. Hurst got along very well.

“Our husbands are wrong,” said a lady after an appointment to her group of friends. “Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley’s discord must not have been so serious. Mr. Bingley’s sisters cannot be getting along so well with the woman who jilted their brother, yet they were chatting and laughing with Mrs. Darcy!”

One of her friends cried, “Men! They always tend to exaggerate everything.”

Elizabeth and the Bingley sisters proceeded to visit the milliners, the book store, and the tea shop, among other places. At the end of it all, they were seen together by many, and could even genuinely call themselves friends.

“It is a remarkable development,” Elizabeth told her husband in their bed later at night. “I did not think myself capable of liking them.”

“Are you certain you like them? It is possible you are deluded by

your other endeavours,” suggested Darcy.

“That is the sort of rudeness that made me wonder whether you disliked me back when we were first acquainted.”

“It is ridiculous to think that I ever disliked you.”

“There it is again!” teased Elizabeth. “Your words may easily be interpreted as slights. Do you remember, my dear Fitz, when I rode to Netherfield on my father’s horse, and you insulted my riding abilities?”

“I did no such thing,” stated Darcy. “Though you *are* a terrible horsewoman.”

“I am flattered.”

“I was only concerned that you would injure yourself on that beast. What were you thinking, riding such a creature?”

“My father insisted I ride instead of walk, and the horse was the only one available. I would have walked once I was out of sight from Longbourn, but was too afraid to dismount on my own.”

“They did not even send an escort with you.”

“You are familiar with my habit of walking alone.”

“I wish that you would wait for me more often, or at least take a footman or two with you. I worry when you go out by yourself. Derbyshire’s terrain is rougher than Hertfordshire’s, and you are still unfamiliar with the land. Then there are the dangers of rogues and the like.”

“You will not have to worry about my wandering about until after the babe is born.”

“After the babe is born, we will resume your riding lessons. As much as I enjoy having you ride with me, it would be improper when we are with company.”

“Ah, yes. I believe even Georgiana is sometimes scandalized by us.”

“Of your poor riding abilities, perhaps.”

“Yet another insult! You are lucky that I know your true feelings, so I find your teasing quite amusing. And of course, you can be most romantic with your words when you choose. I am satisfied on that end.”

Darcy responded by tickling Elizabeth’s sides.

“You must not!” cried Elizabeth, unable to control her laughter. “The babe does not like that!”

“I never took you for a liar,” accused Darcy, smiling. “The babe loves hearing his mother laugh, as I do.” For five more seconds he continued his attack before deciding to show Elizabeth mercy. He transitioned his tickles into softer, sensual ministrations.

“Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth whispered into his ear.

“My lovely Elizabeth,” murmured Darcy. He delighted in the sight of Elizabeth’s hooded eyes, and adored it when his name was repeated

from her lips. "What is it that you want, Lizzy?" he asked her, trailing his hands lower on her body.

He was shocked, but not displeased, when Elizabeth laughed and lunged herself at him, in her own attempt to tickle him. Her hands explored his chest, shoulders, stomach, and sides. Despite all of her efforts Darcy had yet to emit a chuckle.

"I suppose I am simply not ticklish," said Darcy.

Elizabeth frowned and continued her search. Eventually, when she got to his foot, he jerked it back. Elizabeth beamed. "You in fact have sensitive feet, sir."

"Thank you for pointing that out to me," replied Darcy. "You forget, however, that *yours* are sensitive as well."

"You would not dare!"

Darcy smirked, and caught Elizabeth before she could escape.

Darcy narrowed his eyes at the sight of Elizabeth and his cousin, the Colonel, engaged in lively conversation. He did not know whether to feel happy that they were getting along so well, or jealous that their connection was instantaneous. He tried to suppress the latter emotion, but ended up silently sulking and moving closer than usual to his wife.

"Though I have returned, I am still actively in service. Your husband has a habit of ordering me about," said the Colonel.

Elizabeth laughed and spoke, "He can be so highhanded sometimes, can he not?"

"Oh, most definitely," replied the Colonel. He was surprised by Elizabeth's remark. "You are brave to tease Darcy so. He does not like it."

"I make an exception for my wife," interjected Darcy, placing a possessive hand on Elizabeth's waist. The Colonel raised a brow at Darcy, but said nothing to goad him further.

Soon, Elizabeth went to join Georgiana to practice some duets, and Darcy was left alone with his cousin.

"Your wife is a beauty, Darcy, and so charming!" complimented the Colonel.

"Yes, she is."

"Dowerless, as well. You are lucky that you have enough wealth for the both of you. If I were not a second son..." Seeing Darcy glower at him, the Colonel did not finish his sentence. He cleared his throat. "I apologise. I was very surprised to find that you married. You must tell me all."

"We met in Hertfordshire."

"Hertfordshire! It is so close to London; yet she does not partake in the season often? No one knew who she was, and mother knows who

everyone is.”

“Her father does not like town.”

“And she?”

“Elizabeth prefers the country as well, but she enjoys any time spent here. She used to visit her aunt and uncle often.”

“Oh? Where do they live?”

“Gracechurch Street.”

“In Cheapside?”

“Near there, yes.”

“But Mrs. Darcy is a gentlewoman, is she not?”

“Yes. It is her mother’s side of the family that is in trade. The Gardiners are wonderful people nonetheless.”

“Trade! Cheapside! I do not disapprove, but I wonder how father is still speaking to you. How did you come to love her?”

“I was in the middle before I realised I had begun.”

“So she captivated you easily. I suppose she was just as fascinated with you, being the master of Pemberley.”

“Not at all,” said Darcy. “She nearly refused my offer of marriage.”

The Colonel was astounded. “She nearly refused *you*?”

Darcy nodded.

“I do not believe it.”

“It is true.”

“Why? What reason would she have to refuse *you*?”

“She did not see my proposal coming. Though she greatly admired me, in an effort to guard her heart she did not allow herself to fall in love.”

“You are Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire.”

“Elizabeth wanted to marry for love.”

“She accepted you, in the end.”

“Yes; she was well on her way to loving me, and I convinced her to accept my proposal. She soon came to love me when I was able to show myself more advantageously to her, for before, I was trying to hide my feelings for the sake of my friend who thought himself in love with her.”

“If you mean Bingley, I heard that you two had a falling out,” said the Colonel. “If you took away his love for yourself, that explains everything. Though I would never have thought you capable of such a thing. I have always known you to be most loyal.”

“I could not have let go of Elizabeth. My loyalty to *her* will always be observed, even if it means that Bingley will be disappointed. Elizabeth would have never married him, and I could not forsake our happiness.”

As Darcy was evidently irritated, the Colonel said no more on the subject, and proceeded to speak about Georgiana.

“She loves her new sister,” said Darcy. “Elizabeth cannot be more perfect in her eyes, or mine, for that matter. It is all due to her that Georgiana is more spirited than ever – even than before the past summer. You will see later.”

“My mother has been talking about her coming out.”

“She will not have her debut for a while.” Darcy was adamant on that fact.

“I agree, but you know how some folks like to talk about events in the far future as if they need acknowledgement in the present. Take our dear aunt, Lady Catherine, for example, and while we are on the topic of her, are we still going to Rosings for our annual Easter trip?”

“You may go, but I will be in Hertfordshire to visit my wife’s family.”

“Is your wife’s sister not married to Lady Catherine’s parson?”

“Yes,” acknowledged Darcy. “How did you come across that information?”

“Lady Catherine wrote to me herself. But if your brother-in-law is her parson, who I figure will stay in Kent for Easter, why do you not visit there instead of Hertfordshire? You may have been able to kill two birds with one stone.”

Though Mr. and Mrs. Collins had needed to seek sanctuary at Longbourn after only a week in Kent since their wedding, Lady Catherine had soon demanded their return. Unable to take away Mr. Collin’s living, and needing a parson at her church, she did not have many options. Through it all, she remained enraged at the Darcys.

“If Lady Catherine has written to you in great detail, surely you know that I have cut her off after her statements and actions against Elizabeth and her family.”

“So that is what she meant when she called you ungrateful and undutiful. She also said that if Mrs. Darcy was anything like her sister, she must take Georgiana to Rosings, away from you and your wife.” The Colonel shook his head. “I am ashamed of her.”

Darcy was incensed. “Lady Catherine has no little audacity to even suggest taking Georgiana away! Elizabeth and I will not allow it!”

“I will not allow it either,” said the Colonel. “There is a reason your father appointed me her other guardian and spoke nothing of our aunt. Of course, now Georgiana also has a sister. I have only just met Mrs. Darcy, but I can already say that she is the perfect lady for her to look up to. Georgiana will be well-protected.”

“She will be indeed. Elizabeth already thinks of her as her own true sister, and she is fiercely protective of the many that she has. Did you know that my wife once walked three miles after a day of rain to care for her sick sister?” Darcy smiled at the memory of Elizabeth entering Netherfield with her face flushed, eyes brightened, hair mussed by the

wind, and dress tussled.

“Three miles!”

“Yes; and her sister only had a cold. If Elizabeth discovered that Georgiana was stolen away, I can imagine her walking all the way from Pemberley to Rosings.”

The Colonel barely believed it, until on one of the subsequent days, Georgiana came down with a cold herself while she visited Matlock House. Elizabeth appeared, Darcy by her side, and dedicated long days and nights nursing Georgiana back to health, impressing even the Viscount’s wife.

The presence of the Colonel was a good thing for Darcy, who finally had someone besides Elizabeth to talk freely to. Yet, at times Darcy found himself still solemn.

“The Colonel is your relation. He is to you what Jane is like to me, and your Bingley is like my Charlotte,” said Elizabeth one night when Darcy was particularly in a mood. “Though on further consideration, it may be the reverse. Jane and Bingley have a similar goodness, and the Colonel has a wit somewhat like Charlotte, but I digress. I nonetheless need both Jane and Charlotte in my life, and would feel incomplete if one were missing. I reckon it is the same with you, Bingley, and the Colonel.”

“It is perfectly natural for friends to grow apart as they age, especially when one starts a family,” replied Darcy, rubbing Elizabeth’s belly.

“I would not say that you grew apart. You must choose to reconcile, Fitzwilliam, and if not with Mr. Bingley, then with your aunt.”

“My aunt! You cannot seriously expect me to extend an olive branch to *her*. I cannot forgive her for the things she has said about you.”

“Very well. If you do not want to mend things with her now, then you must consider approaching Mr. Bingley again.”

“I will consider, for you.”

“I think you will find, Fitzwilliam, that it will be for *you*.”

Yet, when Elizabeth asked her husband a week later if she should accept Miss Bingley’s invitation to dine at the Hursts’s, he said that he would prefer not to attend.

“Fitzwilliam.”

“Did we also not receive an invitation to dine with one of our neighbours?”

Elizabeth supposed that they should not refuse a countess and earl, especially when her reputation was starting to recover from the hideous gossip.

“Shall we reschedule with the Hursts, then?”

“We shall see.”

Elizabeth frowned and would have pushed him to explain more, but

Georgiana wanted to play a duet at that moment and she could not deny the sweet girl anything.

As the days passed by, Elizabeth had accumulated a pleasant circle of good friends with whom she could spend the day, while Darcy moped – “I do not mope, Elizabeth” – in his study, sometimes with Colonel Fitzwilliam if he were free, but mostly alone with his papers and books.

Once, the Colonel managed to drag Darcy out of the house and into their club. As they chatted with a group of gentlemen, one had mentioned the last date they had seen Darcy there.

“My goodness, Darcy, has it really been so long since you were here?” the Colonel asked.

Darcy, never the one to socialize, usually only went with Bingley. Most of the men at the club seemed to acknowledge the wisdom of not mentioning the estranged friend, but one gentleman, who was deep into his cups, was not so decorous.

“Did you hear,” said he in so booming a voice that Darcy heard from across the room, “that wayward nephew of yours has found himself a new puppy? That Bingley fellow will lend him his fortune if he asks! Good for your nephew, eh? He may be able to pay his debts to me after all.”

The nephew in question was a gambler, rake, and near crook with his business practices, despite being a baron. Darcy did not know what Bingley was thinking, associating with such a man, though on further consideration, the Baron was much like Wickham. He was charming, made good impressions, and his vices were not widely talked about. Even worse, he was not a mere steward’s son that became a red coat, but rather a future peer with an aging earl of a father.

Wanting to discourage Bingley from such a friendship, but unaware if he was in a position to do so, Darcy explained the situation to Elizabeth.

“Oh dear,” said she, after hearing the tale. “Can we not simply invite the Bingleys over for dinner, so you may tell him?”

“You are already hosting two other dinners this week.”

“Four additional chairs are no issue for one of those evenings.”

“I would rather not converse with him in large company, and he may not even attend if we extend an invitation to him.”

“Perhaps I will talk to Caroline and Louisa. They will be able to discourage their brother’s new friendship.”

“Thank you, Eliza.”

“Though I still think that you ought to approach him yourself.”

“Forgive me if I do not think the same.”

“I did not know men could be such stubborn creatures.”

“They are not as stubborn as wives.”

Darcy laughed as Elizabeth threw a pillow at him.

Two days later, Darcy was satisfied when Elizabeth told him that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were appalled at the notion of Bingley lending money to a gambling rake, even if said gambling rake may very well be an earl within a few years, and had thanked Elizabeth profusely for warning them. They had promised to share the information of the Baron's vices with their brother, and would continue keeping an eye him.

The Darcys' remaining time in town corresponded with no sightings of Mr. Bingley. Darcy was nearly becoming as much as a recluse as Elizabeth's father.

"The difference is that you enjoy spending long hours with your family at home, as opposed to wishing that they were out of the house for the sake of peace and quiet," Elizabeth said. She was sitting on Darcy's lap in the library. They had been reading a book together, but the more they debated their differences in interpretations and opinions, the more their conversation veered off topic.

"I am not a recluse. I take you out to balls and to the theatres," defended Darcy.

"That is true," acceded Elizabeth.

"In fact, I am taking you to a ball in two days."

"It is why you are the best of husbands. You dance with me when you detest the art."

"I dislike dancing with others, but I enjoy dancing with *you*."

"Oh! I would tease your habit of contradicting me, but I am too flattered now."

At that very ball, Elizabeth noted how few said hello to Darcy, let alone tried to attempt conversation if she were not beside him.

"I believe it was his friend Bingley who made him seem more approachable," the Colonel whispered to Elizabeth as they danced.

"Perhaps it is the fact that he is married now, and has little to offer to those in want of a groom," replied Elizabeth, though she did see the merit in the Colonel's words.

The Colonel escorted Elizabeth back to Darcy, who had been staring at them instead of talking to the attendees standing near him.

"Come, Darcy, let me introduce you and Mrs. Darcy to some of my officer friends," said the Colonel.

"No, thank you. I must dance with my wife," replied Darcy, taking Elizabeth's hand and escorting her to the forming line of dancers.

"This is already our second dance, Mr. Darcy. What will all the ladies without a partner think?" asked Elizabeth.

"You must know by now that I have a reputation in of not dancing. They will not feel slighted."

"I suppose there are more gentlemen than ladies here tonight. When

we travel to Hertfordshire, however, I must beseech you to dance with at least with all of my sisters if there is a ball.”

“Of course.”

For a moment, there was silence between them.

“I know I have said so before tonight, but you are a stunning beauty, Mrs. Darcy.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I was just about to jest at your inability to make conversation while dancing. Thank you, Mr. Darcy. You are handsome yourself.”

The remainder of the ball, Darcy spoke civilly, but sparsely to the others, and as his wont, sought Elizabeth’s attention more often than not, to the detriment of forming new friends. Elizabeth tried to include her husband as she made lively conversation with the other guests, however she was mindful of Darcy’s limits, and did her best to shield him and herself from the those particularly insipid.

Even so, there was one man who was unavoidable and was far worse than insipid. He had approached Elizabeth when Darcy was retrieving her a refreshment, asking one of the blushing ladies in her group for an introduction. The reason for their blushes was clear; the man was well-dressed, handsome, and titled. If Elizabeth had not recognised his name as the wicked Baron who wanted to exploit Mr. Bingley’s good nature, she may have thought him charming. Instead, she was discomfited by the way his cold grey eyes studied her. He was discreet, but Elizabeth was able to discern how his eyes raked over her figure.

“I have heard of your beauty from my friends,” said the Baron, “and I must say, they were correct in every one of their praises.” He turned to one of the ladies. “Is Mrs. Darcy not one of the handsomest ladies in town?”

The lady turned pink at the attention. “Oh, yes, my lord. She most certainly is a rose!”

“I prefer the term *angel*,” replied the Baron.

The reference to Mr. Bingley’s particular vocabulary was unsettling, and Elizabeth wished for Darcy to soon come back to her side. As the Baron continued speaking, he became increasingly daring.

“Though I must say, *rose* is fitting as well. I have heard Mrs. Darcy favors the scent of red roses. Is that true?”

“Yes, my lord. However, I do not know many who do not,” said Elizabeth.

The Baron laughed. “Yet few are so well suited for it as you are. Red is a bold colour.” He gestured to the Darcy rubies Elizabeth wore around her neck. “They are as lovely as their wearer, Mrs. Darcy.”

“You are too flattering, my lord.”

“I am only speaking the truth.” The Baron smiled. “May I have the

next dance, Mrs. Darcy?"

"I am afraid I am waiting for my husband, my lord."

Apparently, one could not simply refuse a dance with a man of such high standing. The judgement from the other ladies made it clear that it would be in Elizabeth's best interest to accept. *It is a mere dance*, thought Elizabeth as the Baron led her to the line of dancers. *He cannot attempt anything when there are so many people around*. Catching Darcy's frown from his place at the refreshment table, Elizabeth gave him an apologetic glance. She felt considerably calmer knowing that Darcy would not take his eyes off of them for a second. He would intervene if necessary, propriety or not.

"You dance extremely well, Mrs. Darcy," said the Baron.

Elizabeth thanked him.

"I had been surprised when I heard that Mr. Darcy married, but now that I have been introduced to you, it is no surprise at all."

There was a separation of couples in the dance. When they were face to face again, the Baron proceeded to drop all of his civility and completely offend Elizabeth as no other had before.

"Mr. Darcy is a serious, solemn man, and though I can see why he is attracted to you, I can hardly fathom that a lively creature such as yourself is satisfied with him."

"I beg your pardon?"

The Baron ignored Elizabeth's piercing glare and continued to speak lowly so none but her could hear. "Of course, there is Pemberley and all of his wealth, but that can be no replacement for good company. Surely, you are familiar with the ways of the world. You already have an heir underway if rumours are to be believed, and need not deal with so boring a man any longer. My good friend Bingley still holds you in his heart, and I have found a way for you to two to be together, without your husband's knowledge. I have a house in town near Cheapside, where I know you have relatives –"

"That is enough," Elizabeth interjected. "I have never been so offended in my life. I am loyal to my husband, sir, and it would be wise for you to never approach me again."

Before he could respond, she stepped away from him and said more loudly, "I am sorry, I'm afraid I may have harmed my ankle."

She barely curtsied when Darcy appeared by her side, tucking her hand in his. "Excuse us."

Darcy brought Elizabeth to a secluded terrace, passing her the drink he had acquired earlier. "Are you well, Elizabeth?"

She nodded. "Thank you for coming to my aid."

"Of course, my love. I am only sorry that I failed to prevent his approach in the first place. What did he say to you?"

As Elizabeth explained their conversation nearly word-for-word,

both she and Darcy grew more enraged by the second. However, while her anger was fully directed towards the Baron, Darcy held others to some ounces of responsibility.

“You will not have to deal with him again, my love. I will make sure of it,” said Darcy. Elizabeth had never seen him so furious, and had to lay a hand on his arm to calm him. Though his tone softened, he had more to rant. “I knew Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst could not be trusted, but I am disgusted by Bingley! What kind of scoundrel does he think he is?”

“I am not so sure that the Bingleys are aware of the Baron’s...offer.”

“Even if they are not, it is insupportable that Bingley had befriended him in the beginning. He has finally lost my good opinion.”

“You do not mean that, Fitzwilliam.”

“I do. I will no longer recognise him, if we were to meet again. And you shall cease your association with his sisters.”

“I will certainly not, Fitzwilliam! They have done no wrong, no matter what you may believe.”

“You do not believe that they encouraged their brother to befriend a future earl? That it is not entirely in their characters to do so?”

“They may aspire for great connections, but they are not without morals. They would be horrified to be associated with such a man.”

“Even if that is the case, their brother has made his choices.”

Elizabeth sighed. “It has been quite the eventful evening. I am ready to go home, if you would like.”

Darcy immediately agreed.

The next morning, both he and Elizabeth were eager to throw out a freshly delivered bouquet of red roses. It was addressed to Mrs. Darcy, signed with a note of forgiveness from the Baron, and decorated with a familiar red ribbon. Ever so observant, Darcy noticed that the ribbon was the same as one of the recent pieces Elizabeth had bought while shopping with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, and the list of those not welcomed at Darcy House grew.

Chapter 16

Darcy did not expect to enjoy visiting Longbourn for Easter. For all of his trips to Hertfordshire, there was no one, save for his Elizabeth, he thought well of. He did not think it was too surprising of a conclusion, when the county's leading figures were the ridiculous Sir William Lucas and the sardonic Mr. Bennet. Granted, he neither expected that he would have enjoyed Easter at Rosings, if they had gone; he never did before, and only went for the sake of family and checking that his aunt's estate was running well. And although he did not particularly like Hertfordshire, he did think that going there had the bright side of being farther away from Bingley and the unsavory Baron. In Hertfordshire, he and Elizabeth could not accidentally run into either of them at the club, the park, the theatre, or anywhere else.

Thus, he was completely surprised when, not a week into his stay in the inconsequential countryside, he awoke to find Elizabeth gone from his side, the sorry replacement for her soft body being a note stating she was calling at Netherfield. He was up and calling for his valet in seconds.

"Mr. Darcy! Where are you going in such a hurry!" cried Mrs. Bennet as he ignored the breakfast room in favour of the front door.

He did not stop as he answered, "I am going to Elizabeth."

"Oh dear! I had hoped Lizzy would have grown out of her morning rambles when she married! She may be at the south meadow, or on her way to Oakham mount, or –"

"I know where my wife is," Darcy said curtly. He left the house and nearly ran to the stables, where he jumped on his horse and rode as fast as he could to Netherfield.

He was shown into a parlour where Elizabeth was in the middle of conversation with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, looking as if there was nothing wrong in the world. The ladies startled at his entrance.

"Mr. Darcy –"

"Excuse me," Darcy interjected Miss Bingley. "If I may have a moment alone with my wife."

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst glanced around nervously, but acceded to leave the room. When the door shut, Darcy began to pace until finally settling down on the seat next to Elizabeth's.

"Did you break your fast yet?" he asked.

"I had a small piece of bread. I have lately not been very hungry in

the mornings, as you know,” replied Elizabeth.

Darcy placed a hand on Elizabeth’s belly. “I do know, but you still must eat.” Then, he continued to say in a most condescending tone, “I am glad that you at least took the carriage here, but you are otherwise reckless! Did you not think of waking me before you left? Or perhaps informing me that Bingley was to reopen Netherfield?”

“I am sorry for not waking you. You were sleeping so well, and I thought to be back before you awoke.”

“So you were not going to tell me at all of your call on Bingley’s sisters?”

“Of course I was!” said Elizabeth, incensed at the accusation. “I only did not tell you because I know you would have forbidden me to go, and then I would be cross at you, and you at me when I would defy you. If I told you of my visit after its occurrence, you would still be cross, but less so, and I may not have been cross at all.”

“Of course I would have forbidden you to go. Imagine if the Baron was waiting for you, instead of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst!”

“I have told you time and time again that they are not using me as bait for that wicked man!”

“You trust them too easily. The Baron sent you florals wrapped in ribbon you recently bought. If it was not them who told him of your purchase, who was it?”

“The shopkeeper, for one, or perhaps one of the ladies in the room. I do not doubt that a man such as he has many friends of the fairer sex.”

“I find it far more likely for *Bingley’s* sisters to have a hand in the matter.”

“You cannot think the worst of them simply because you are upset with their brother.”

“Even if they are innocent, do not be so ingenuous that you believe it is safe to venture here alone.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “You are being ridiculous.”

“I do not think it unordinary that a man does not want his wife to enter the home of a man who covets her!” Darcy started pacing back and forth again, while Elizabeth watched in indignation.

“I did not go for *him*. I went to see Caroline and Louisa, at their invitation. We also both know that Mr. Bingley would never act so indecorously as to approach a married woman. Though if you are still falsely disillusioned of his character by the recent events, rest assured, Caroline and Louisa said that their brother was still abed; he did not even see me.”

“You should have awoken me, or at the very least, bring one of your sisters with you.”

“I could not have. We wanted to speak about you and Mr. Bingley;

your feud with him has gone on too long.”

“I would have also appreciated a warning, Elizabeth, that they would be in Hertfordshire.”

“You would have taken us elsewhere for Easter.”

“Of course I would have. You knew that Bingley and I would be forcibly thrown in the same company if I did not, as small as the inconsequential society here is.”

“Inconsequential society? These are the people I grew up with, sir. They may have their oddities, but you cannot deny that on the whole they are amiable and caring compared to the ruthlessness of the *ton*. You are insulting my friends family, and therefore you are insulting me,” ranted Elizabeth. “*Friends*. You and Mr. Bingley need to stop this squabble. Yes, his sisters and I may have conspired to force the two of you together, but we could not have you both sulking around for eternity! I have heard that he, who had always been cheery no matter the circumstance, has been as miserable as you, and you cannot deny that you have been bereft. Whenever I am with my friends in town, you brood in your library instead of seeking out your own friend Bingley! And during our few days here in Hertfordshire, you have been bored out of your mind while I am with my sisters and neighbours. How will you manage being here a month longer? I accept that you and the other gentlemen may not ever be the closest of friends, but if you cannot settle for them, you must turn to Bingley! You and he were so strong before! Why do you not make amends? I *know* that you do not believe that he conspired with that odious baron to make that repulsive proposition. You have the ability to recover a friendship of a lifetime, so why do you insist on holding onto the letter of explanation you wrote to him?”

“I have sent the letter!” Darcy shouted in anguish, his movement stilled.

Elizabeth leaned back in surprise. “You sent it? When?”

“It has been out of my possession since before the ball, for well over a month,” said Darcy, starting to pace back and forth again. “As you can tell, I have not been delighted with a note in return, but the message is clear. The man wants nothing to do with me, Elizabeth, and there is nothing you or anyone can do to make that different.” His emotions too high, he stalked out of the room, leaving a wide-eyed Elizabeth to watch him go.

Not ten seconds later, Darcy walked back inside and knelt before Elizabeth. He placed his head on her lap. “I am sorry,” he apologised.

Elizabeth had never seen Darcy so vulnerable, and it broke her heart.

“No, I am so sorry,” she murmured, running her hands through Darcy’s hair. “My sweet Fitzwilliam, if only I could take your pain

away.”

She bent down to kiss Darcy's forehead, and held him as a tear quietly slid onto her skirts.

Bingley had been sitting in silence in what was once Netherfield's pathetic excuse for a library. He had trouble sleeping, for he had recollected the memories of his previous stay in the leased estate, and had gone there early to think. He felt a fool for not noticing Darcy's regard for Elizabeth. Darcy never started conversations, yet he had no trouble doing so with Elizabeth. Darcy never danced with any lady outside of his party, yet he had danced with Elizabeth. Bingley felt utterly blind to not have made conclusions sooner.

More so than recognising his foolishness, however, he recalled with sweet melancholy how Darcy and he had spent many hours riding and walking through the estate. He remembered how Darcy had showed him how to scout the land for planting, how to check in on the tenants' farming, and how to take the first steps in transforming the neglected lake into something usable. He remembered himself showing Darcy around the countryside, dragging Darcy to Meryton, and the two of them finding the numerous hidden doors and corridors in Netherfield.

Of all their explorations of the estate, they had never realised that Netherfield's walls were thin. Bingley soon sat in complete shock as he listened to Darcy's and Elizabeth's raised voices in the adjacent parlour.

When it quieted down, he stood and walked back to his bedroom. Opening a drawer, he took out a letter addressed to him, in Darcy's perfectly neat handwriting. It was sealed. He never realised how heavy it was. He had not planned on ever opening it, yet he had never been able to bring himself to throw it into the fire. He even went so far as to bring it with him to Netherfield. Why would he do that, he asked himself, when he swore that there was nothing more his former friend could possibly tell him, that he would want to hear?

It was the anguish he had heard in Darcy's voice minutes before that brought him to break the seal. Not fifteen minutes later he was out the door, letter in hand, and running to the parlour where he hoped Darcy would still be. Any jealousy he experienced at seeing Darcy with Elizabeth subsided when he saw the redness in his friend's eyes. He had never seen him cry before, and actually thought him incapable of the action. While Darcy did not notice his presence, Elizabeth did. She met Bingley's eyes, and the two of them shared an understanding smile. It was bittersweet for him to see her so in love with his best friend, and ultimately he thought that if she was happy,

then maybe he could forgive Darcy. He watched as Elizabeth dried Darcy's face with her hands, kissed his forehead, and gently took his head off her lap. She whispered something in his ear before removing herself from the room, curtsying to Bingley on the way out. When Darcy turned around in confusion, he startled at the sight of Bingley. Although Bingley had the advantage of entering the room with the intent of seeing his friend, and was witness to his private moment with his wife, he startled as well.

Hastily, Darcy got on his feet. "I am sorry for coming here without notice. I will leave."

Darcy went for the door until Bingley regained his senses and cried, "Wait!" He waved the papers he held in his hands. "I – I finally read your letter." When Darcy remained speechless, he continued, "I am sorry for not having the mind to read it until now. If I was not so, so... I was hurt, Darcy."

There was silence between them.

"Words cannot describe how sorry I am," finally spoke Darcy.

"But they *can*! They are written here." Bingley gestured to the letter. "If I had read it earlier, you would be staying at Netherfield, and not Longbourn."

"You truly mean that?" asked Darcy, searching his friend's face.

Bingley nodded. "I do. I might have been a little angry at you still, but I like to think that we would have, for the most part, been on our usual jolly terms."

"You have never been one to hold a grudge."

"I did try!" joked Bingley. He then grimaced. "I am whole-heartedly ashamed of my recent choice of acquaintances. I must tell you that when Caroline and Louisa told me of the Baron's vices, I immediately disassociated with him. I hope that he did not approach you to take revenge on my falling out with him."

"He did."

Bingley was very alarmed. "I dearly hope it was not too scarring of an encounter."

"He approached Elizabeth, offering her a chance to have an affair with you."

Bingley gaped. "What the – I would never! Darcy, you must know that no matter how wronged I felt by you, I would never betray you, especially by – I cannot even say the words. The audacity of him!"

"I know. Though, I admit that for a while, I feared that you were too pressured by him, and it did not help that I resented you for not responding to my letter. Elizabeth never doubted you, and I am sorry that I did."

There was a minute where none spoke, and both looked awkwardly at the floor.

"She is happy?" asked Bingley.

"She is," Darcy immediately replied.

"And you...?"

"I am," answered Darcy. "Incredibly so."

"Good. That is good. I am happy for you – for both of you."

"Thank you, Bingley. You do not know what that means to me."

Darcy and Bingley drew the courage to look at each other.

"I want you to know that I forgive you, and I only hope that you can forgive me for throwing a tantrum at the club, and for not reading your letter, and for the Baron and everything else," said Bingley.

"You have nothing to forgive. I would have reacted worse in your position. My actions were truly horrendous, and I cannot be more ashamed of them. I should have made every effort to tell you all. Elizabeth encouraged me to, and I can see now what she had always told me; pride is my greatest flaw."

"I suppose your greatest line of defence was that you thought I would find another lady, which even I admit, was a sensible thing for you to think. Indeed, I almost let myself fall in love again while I went to visit Hurst's family..."

"I was still a coward not to face you."

"Yes, I agree."

"I do not know how I can ever make amends, but I will try," said Darcy with utmost sincerity. "Will you dine with us this evening at Longbourn?"

"Only if you dine here tomorrow," replied Bingley.

The two had too many things to say to each other, that they could not decide on what to speak, and said nothing at all. The awkwardness may have lasted the entire morning, if not for the pitter-patter heard in the hall, accompanied by a few barks.

"I acquired a puppy," explained Bingley. "I should probably attend to Mr. Darwin – the puppy, that is. He may become the world's worst grump otherwise, and require many treats to get into a better mood."

He might have gotten the puppy because its dourness reminded him of Darcy, but he did not say that aloud.

"You must introduce us soon," said Darcy. "Elizabeth and I ought to return to Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet seemed panicked when I had left there."

"Yes, of course. I do not envy you on that account."

A few seconds later, Bingley threw his arms around Darcy in a tight hug. Darcy returned it.

"Will you name your child after me as your token of apology? Charles if it is a boy, and Charlotte if it is a girl?"

"You are asking for a lot."

"That is not a refusal! But I will not push it. Rather, I will warn

you that I may not have paid close enough attention to you when you advised me on how to run Netherfield from afar, so I may need your help later on..."

"That is it?" Elizabeth asked Darcy as they walked back to Longbourn, arm in arm. "The two of you are well again?"

Darcy nodded. "Of course."

Elizabeth muttered something under her breath.

"What?" asked Darcy.

"I said, it is so typical of men to recover from an argument with so few words. Caroline, Louisa, and I should have locked the both of you in a room at the very beginning to sort things out in minutes."

"I thought our conversation was quite long."

"You have never seen how my younger sisters resolved their grudges against each other and their friends. It takes at least several days after apologies are uttered for them to return to their normal state."

"Was it not your goal to have us reconciled? I do not know the source of your complaints."

"I suppose Bingley is the peaceful sort, like Jane, who forgives too easily." Elizabeth smiled at Darcy. "I am happy that you have your dearest friend back."

"You are to credit. I may not have seen him until months later, but you have allowed us to communicate fully. Your previous chastisements of my pride have also helped me immensely, for I believe I would have more than likely offended him instead of apologising if you had not put me to task. What would have become of me, of my character, if not for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth? You have saved me," said Darcy. "I was given mercy, and I will not take it for granted."

"I would have never thought that a man could be so attractive whilst expounding on his faults." Elizabeth raised her mischievous eyes to meet Darcy's. "How convenient of you to send the carriage back on its own."

"It is a lovely morning, and I know how much you missed walking these paths."

"Yes, and there is a particular path with the prettiest flowers that bloom in the spring. It is quite the secluded area. No one ever travels through it, much less at this hour."

"Perhaps you will show me this idyllic scenery?" Darcy began caressing Elizabeth's waist.

"Oh, but we must not be away from Longbourn too long, else my poor mother starts worrying. You know how her nerves are."

“Eliza, do not tease me so.” Darcy gently nipped Elizabeth’s ear. “I know you do not truly wish to return so soon, Lizzy, my Beth.”

Elizabeth flushed as Darcy’s hands and lips began to roam. “Very well. You have convinced me. Come, Will, so we are not in full view in *this* path. That is a scandal in the making.”

A small part of Elizabeth had thought that it was impossible for Darcy and Bingley to have restored their friendship to what it had been before so soon. Yet there they were, sitting at Mrs. Bennet’s table, acting as if they did not actively hold a grudge on each other for the past several months.

“Darcy, you ought to try the potatoes,” said Bingley. Like always, he was attempting to get his friend to become more engaged in the present, which included making jokes about Mr. Collin’s dietary preferences.

Darcy, as usual, was unamused. “I have already had a portion.”

“They were divine, were they not?” asked Bingley, grinning. To Mrs. Bennet, he said, “I must give every compliment to you and your cook.”

Mrs. Bennet was once again completely charmed by Mr. Bingley. Two daughters married, and one to one of the wealthiest gentlemen of England, was not enough for her – at least, not with Netherfield let by such an amiable, eligible man, who was currently at her table. Perhaps Mr. Bingley was like Mr. Collins, she thought, and could be persuaded to move onto another daughter of hers. She asked the gentleman how long he would be staying in the country.

“You had left so suddenly, all those months ago,” Mrs. Bennet added, ignoring the disapproving look Elizabeth sent her way. “We were also sorry to miss you at my dear Mrs. Darcy’s wedding.”

Mr. Bingley blushed. “Yes, I was sorry to miss it too,” he managed to say.

“Mama,” interjected Elizabeth. “How was Mary when you visited her?”

“Oh, my dear Mrs. Collins has never been so in her element! She runs such a quaint little house! It is nothing, of course, to *your* properties, Mrs. Darcy, but we are speaking of Mary, after all, and for *her*, the parsonage is more than suitable.”

Elizabeth regretted asking her mother anything at all. She tried again with Jane, who had accompanied Mrs. Bennet on the trip. “Is Mary making use of her instrument?”

The Darcys had gifted the Collins a pianoforte fitted for the parsonage for their wedding.

“Yes, she cannot be happier with it. She played daily for us all,”

answered Jane. Kitty and Lydia snickered and whispered to themselves how they were glad that they did not have to be there for *that*, and instead were able to be in the excellent company of the officers in Meryton.

"I wrote to you about Denny, did I not?" Kitty asked Georgiana, who blushed and nodded. Kitty giggled. "I will tell you more when –"

"La! There is nothing for *you* to tell. You are imagining that he is sweet on you," interrupted Lydia.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst appeared mortified at how friendly Kitty and Lydia were with Georgiana.

"Darcy, your aunt's estate – Rosings – is in Kent, is it not?" asked Bingley, unaware of his friend's falling out with her. When Darcy nodded, Bingley addressed Jane, "Did you see the great Lady Catherine?"

Jane blushed at the attention. "Only during the services at church, sir."

"Then you have seen her far more than I have." Although Bingley would most likely later question Darcy why his aunt did not give Mrs. Darcy's family their due, he was discerning and peace-driven enough to presently change the topic. "What of Kent itself, Miss Bennet? Do you prefer it to Hertfordshire?"

As Jane and Mr. Bingley continued their conversation, Elizabeth looked on with excitement.

"Are they not a handsome pair?" she asked Darcy when they retired.

"Not as handsome as the one we make, though much of that is credited to you," replied Darcy, escorting Elizabeth from the windowsill to the bed. "You should not be matchmaking, my dear."

"I am not matchmaking. I am simply sharing my innermost hopes with you." Elizabeth wrapped her arms around Darcy's middle. "I would never say such things to anyone else."

"I hope you will not be disappointed when none of it comes to fruition."

"You sound so certain. Do you disapprove?"

"I have not really considered it, but I suppose Bingley could aspire for –" Darcy cut himself off. He thought that Bingley could do better than Elizabeth's dowerless sister who had the personality of a smiling wall, but saying that to Elizabeth would guarantee him at least a month of misery. She was already glaring at him, so beautifully, but with so much anger. He cleared his throat. "I mean to say, do you not think that he should aspire for love?"

"Of course I do." Elizabeth frowned. "You do not think that he could ever love Jane?"

"As much as I dislike speaking of it, he *did* harbor feelings for you,

and I am sure some of it remains still. And your sister promoted the match between Bingley and *you*. I rather doubt that her feelings are strong."

"You do not know Jane as I do. She is so selfless that she would give up her affections for a man because of her affections for me. I know that she admires Bingley. Did you not see how they spoke to themselves nearly the entire evening?"

"Under your mother's wishes, certainly."

"If you are implying that Jane only covets Bingley to satisfy my mother, you are sorely mistaken."

"You said yourself that Jane is selfless."

"If my mother's wishes aligns with hers, then it is fortunate."

"Then I suppose we should hope Bingley has finally found his new, and last, angel."

Elizabeth and Darcy were silent for a moment, as they simply enjoyed relaxing in each other's arms after the long, eventful day.

"I am glad that you have reconciled." Elizabeth sighed contently and snuggled closer to Darcy.

"I am too." Darcy kissed the top of Elizabeth's head. "Thank you, Elizabeth."

While Elizabeth and Georgiana were in the music room at Netherfield with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, Darcy and Bingley were playing billiards. It had been a few days since their reunion, and the two gentlemen had very much returned to the state they had been in last autumn. Bingley's personality did not allow him, after receiving a genuine apology, to carry resentment.

"Will you still come to Pemberley this summer?" asked Darcy.

"Pemberley! I would be a fool to refuse to be its guest. What I would give to buy the estate from you," said Bingley. He made the final shot. "Well, it appears that I have won. What do you say, Darcy – shall I have your lovely home as my winnings?"

"I am afraid you must content yourself with my brandy."

"That is well. Hurst will be jealous."

"You always share with him."

"I will not this time. He confessed to me yesterday that there was another old letter from you addressed to me at his town house. Apparently it arrived after we had left to visit his family, but he knew of it when we were back in town, and did not mention it to me!"

"I am surprised he confessed at all, now that the matter between us is resolved. It is somewhat admirable, at least."

"Oh, it is barely admirable. You know Hurst. Enough sips of that one wine and he talks until he sleeps. Though he was so amusing in

his cups that I could not help but get over my anger and forgive him. A bit of teasing with the brandy may do him some good, however.”

“Shall we play another game?”

“Ha! You are sore that you lost.” Before Bingley could say any more, the music from the other room, which had ceased a while ago, was replaced with alarming ruckus.

“Elizabeth!” cried Darcy, running through the doors, an equally startled Bingley following behind him. Ignoring the chaos of the music room, including the strange appearance of John and Charlotte Lucas, and Jane and Lydia Bennet, Darcy strode directly to his distressed wife. “What has happened, my love? Where is Georgiana?”

“And my sisters?” asked Bingley.

“They left to the gardens to give us some privacy,” Elizabeth managed to say.

Darcy wiped her tears with his handkerchief and asked her if she needed to rest in one of the bedrooms.

“No, Fitzwilliam, I must stay.” At his worried look, she reassured, “I am well enough, and the babe is fine.”

Darcy smiled softly at her before turning to the rest of the room with a most stern mien. “What is going on?”

The Lucases glanced nervously at Bingley, who cleared his throat. “I shall leave you.”

Once the door shut behind Bingley, Miss Lucas spoke, “Lydia was seen with Mr. Wickham.”

Darcy grimaced. “Mr. Wickham?”

“They were caught in an embrace,” explained Mr. Lucas.

“La! Do not look at me like that, Lucas. I know you steal a few kisses too, and I do not see you marrying anyone,” said Lydia. “I do not know why you are so upset, Lizzy. Jane, tell her not to worry. I am not going to marry Mr. Wickham because of a few kisses! Only you and Charlotte and Lucas saw anyhow.”

“Where is Wickham now?” asked Darcy.

Mr. Lucas answered, “He is in the drawing room. We would have gone to Longbourn first, but Lydia was insistent that he not talk to Mr. Bennet.”

Darcy cursed under his breath.

“Oh no.” Elizabeth gasped, comprehending her husband’s reaction. “He is not here, is he?”

Darcy nodded. “He might be at Longbourn by now.”

“Longbourn!” cried Lydia.

Elizabeth took Darcy’s hand. “I will come with you.”

Darcy could not deny Elizabeth anything, so he agreed to have the carriage readied.

“You will stay here with Jane, Lydia,” directed Elizabeth.

“But I will need to convince papa not to marry me off to a steward’s son! Mr. Wickham is handsome enough to kiss, but he is not even a colonel!”

Jane tried to reassure her sister. “Lydia, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy will make sure that nothing terrible will befall you.”

“But if anything does, it is of her own making. Can you at least be ashamed of your actions, Lydia?”

“You are so proper and boring, Lizzy.”

“Lydia, Eliza has a point,” said Miss Lucas. “Because of your reckless behaviour, you are in danger of tying yourself to a man with no property and little income.”

“I will not take advice from a *spinster*.”

“Lydia!”

“What, Lizzy? Charlotte *is* a spinster. If she were in my position, she would be dying to marry Mr. Wickham, but I can find a better husband.”

“That is enough, Lydia.” Elizabeth glanced at Jane, who understood her perfectly, and took Lydia to sit in a chair on the other side of the room.

The Lucases, having known Lydia all of their lives, were only a little offended by her, and reassured Elizabeth that she need not apologise on her sister’s behalf.

“Thank you for your discretion in the entire matter. I could not imagine the fear if someone else had stumbled upon them,” said Elizabeth.

“You are our dear friend, Eliza.” Charlotte gestured to Jane. “We had sighted her first. She was apparently sent by Mrs. Bennet to look for Lydia, and was completely frozen as she spied her with Mr. Wickham! Poor Jane did not know what to do. Lydia and her beau were out in the open; I have little doubt that he wanted someone to stumble across them. A militia’s pay is not much.”

When the carriage was readied, Elizabeth, Darcy, and Mr. Lucas, who was to come to explain what he had seen to Mr. Bennet if need be, left to Longbourn. Mr. Lucas was surprised to observe that the arrogant Mr. Darcy was so loving to his wife, and Mr. Darcy was surprised that Mr. Lucas was more sensible than his father, Sir William Lucas. Elizabeth spent the carriage ride concerned for her sister’s fate. Her friend was most likely correct; Mr. Wickham wanted access to part of the Darcy fortune by targeting the Bennets. Lydia was incredibly irresponsible, and thus an easy victim, to a practised seducer of young ladies. It all made Elizabeth’s stomach squirm.

As expected, Wickham was in the study with Mr. Bennet when they arrived at Longbourn. Elizabeth’s solace was that her mother was unaware of Wickham’s presence, distracted as she was by Mrs.

Phillips's call, and had also accepted the fact that Lydia and Jane were at Netherfield. She only questioned whether Mr. Bingley was there as well, and was satisfied when Elizabeth gave her the answer she hoped for.

The atmosphere was grave when the Darcys and Mr. Lucas entered the study, making sure the door was shut tight behind them.

"Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy," greeted Mr. Bennet. He raised an eyebrow at the third member of their party. "Mr. Lucas."

"Mr. Lucas was one of the witnesses," said Mr. Wickham, his face a little white at seeing Darcy, but nonetheless trying to act as genuine as possible. "I am so sorry that you had to see... I am heartedly ashamed of my actions. I must repeat my apologies to you all, Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Darcy, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Lucas. I was too overcome by love, but I know that I should not have acted so. I am ready to do the honourable thing, and ask for Miss Lydia Bennet's hand in marriage."

"That is unnecessary," stated Mr. Darcy. To Mr. Bennet, he explained, "The three who saw them together – Mr. Lucas, Miss Lucas, and Miss Bennet – will not spread the tale. Mr. Wickham is a dishonourable man who is only after my wealth."

"That is not true," said Mr. Wickham. "I have a genuine regard for the youngest Miss Bennet."

"Lydia does not wish to marry Mr. Wickham, papa. Please, do not make them marry," spoke Elizabeth.

"That cannot be true, Mrs. Darcy. Miss Bennet had told me herself that she loves me. We would not have acted the way we had without love," countered Mr. Wickham.

Mr. Bennet grimaced. He turned to Mr. Lucas. "Tell me, what exactly occurred between my daughter and this officer?"

As Mr. Lucas told his side of the story, Elizabeth and Darcy glared at Wickham with enough hatred to make the man swallow a few times, and Mr. Bennet looked, by the second, as if he aged some years.

"Mr. Wickham would not be able to provide for your daughter, Mr. Bennet. His debts may not be well-known, but they exist," added Darcy when Lucas finished.

"Perhaps, in the past I have made some unfortunate bets, that was some time ago. We have not spoken to each other for many years, Darcy, and I am an improved man," said Mr. Wickham. "I assure you all that I am perfectly capable to provide for the future Mrs. Wickham. My income from the militia may not be as substantial as what Miss Bennet may be used to, but we will manage with our love, and with enough time and the right connections, I may be able eligible for a promotion."

"Forgive me if I take the word of my son-in-law over yours."

"Please, Mr. Bennet, I do not want your daughter to suffer should

word spread. There may be others who saw us and are not as good as Mr. Lucas."

Mr. Bennet sighed. Before Wickham could plead further, he addressed his daughter. "Lizzy, what is your opinion on the matter? Lydia *had* acted recklessly, and I cannot deny that I am half of the mind that she would deserve her fate."

"Lydia may have been careless, but you cannot tie her to such a selfish, despicable man! She is young, and with the right guidance, there may be a chance for her to learn from her mistakes," pleaded Elizabeth. "You cannot let him marry her. She will be miserable, and he would become a constant thorn in our lives."

"Please, Mrs. Darcy, I am standing right here," said Mr. Wickham. "I do not know what lies your husband told you about me, but I hope that I may be given a chance to prove to you, your sister, and the rest of your family the truth of my character."

"It is not unheard of," replied Elizabeth, "that a good opinion, once lost, is lost forever."

Mr. Wickham looked between Elizabeth and Darcy in disbelief.

"If you wanted money, you would have been better off running away with her. Alas, you did not, my daughter's reputation is safe, and I have nothing more to say to you but good day," said Mr. Bennet, dismissing Wickham with a wave of his hand. All four other occupants in the room winced at his distasteful joke, but he did not seem to notice, or if he did, he did not seem to care.

"I believe," spoke Darcy after a few seconds, "that Mr. Bennet is telling you to leave, Mr. Wickham."

"Yes, I was just on my way out, Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Darcy. Mr. Lucas." Wickham bowed. "Mr. Bennet, if you ever reconsider my offer, I will gladly step up to do my duty and marry your daughter."

When he received the bare minimum of a reply, Wickham finally exited the estate.

"Well," said Mr. Bennet, "Mr. Wickham is a handsome fellow."

"The things I could do if I had a face like his. Or yours, Mr. Darcy, for that matter," jested Mr. Lucas. "It is a shame that he has proven himself a villain."

"I thank you three for your interference. Though I was quite capable of dealing with him alone, and though it is nice to know how much faith you all have in me, I must be grateful that you expedited his presence in my study." Mr. Bennet picked up a book. "If you may return with Lydia, Lizzy, I would be more grateful still. I would like to speak with her."

"We will bring her back, papa."

The task of returning Lydia to Longbourn was more difficult than anyone would have imagined. In the hour they had been gone, Lydia

seemed to have assimilated too much to Netherfield's grandeur. She had claimed fatigue in order to be placed in a bedroom, not allowing anyone to check on her but frequently making use of the servants. When Elizabeth arrived, Lydia agreed to see her, and only her. Elizabeth was glad that Miss Bingley had placed her highhanded sister in the smallest of guest bedrooms.

"I do not see why you do not stay here instead of Longbourn, Lizzy," said Lydia, sitting on the bed like it was a throne. "If you did, then you could tell Miss Bingley to prepare me a proper room."

"And why would I ask such a thing of Miss Bingley?" asked Elizabeth, crossing her arms.

"Because I am your most deserving sister. Miss Bingley should not mind my company, not when I am the sister of the wealthy Mrs. Darcy."

"Lydia, you cannot stay here, with an invitation or otherwise. You must return to Longbourn and explain yourself to our father."

"You said yourself that he would not make me marry Mr. Wickham! What more is there to say about the matter?"

"If you disobey him further, you may end up tied to Mr. Wickham after all!"

"I most certainly will not. You will take me to London, and find me a rich, handsome husband that wears a uniform. I may be married before Jane!"

"Lydia, if you insist on being a selfish, silly girl, I will take you to town, but instead of bringing you to balls and other parties, I will see to it that you are placed under a governess, or sent away to a school."

"You cannot do that! You are not papa."

"Indeed I am not, and as you are not yet one-and-twenty, you must do as papa says. Truly, you should be pleading for his forgiveness. You could have ruined yourself and our sisters. Have you no sense? No shame?"

"If papa cared at all, why is he not here now?" Lydia sniffed.

Elizabeth relaxed her mien. "I know papa may be reclusive at times, but he *does* care about all of us."

"I will not apologise. I have done nothing wrong."

"Lydia, do you *want* to marry Mr. Wickham?"

"No, but –"

"Then you must show remorse. If someone else had seen you, then you would likely have been forced to marry him! You do not know how despicable Mr. Wickham is, Lydia. Do you know that he has a reputation for fooling with over a dozen young ladies? Do you know that he gambled away more than three thousand pounds in the span of a few years? What of his drinking habits and other vices? It is even likely that he is the father of multiple natural children. Those poor,

poor children.” Elizabeth placed her hands on her rounded belly and was unable to control the tears streaming down her face. “What could have become of you, Lyddie! My little sister, unable to rid herself of such a man, who only coveted her to ask for money from me and my husband! I would have made sure you were well in spite of anything, but you must know that though Mr. Wickham is the son of Pemberley’s late steward, he is not allowed entrance to any of my husband’s homes. Please, Lyddie, you must be more careful in the future, and only marry for love.”

Lydia was shocked at her sister’s outburst. “Very well, Lizzy. I will apologise to papa, if you will stop crying.” Then, to herself, she muttered, “I shall never get with child if it means I turn into *that*.”

Chapter 17

“I daresay this is the most exciting ball I have ever been to!” exclaimed Bingley. “It is all due to you, Darcy. I have never seen you dance so often; it is truly a sight to behold.”

They were at an assembly in Meryton, and while Bingley was enjoying it, Darcy was not.

“You and Elizabeth have too many sisters,” grumbled Darcy.

“You should consider yourself lucky that one of Mrs. Darcy’s sisters is in Kent, and another is at home, else you would have to dance twice more.” Bingley watched with amusement as Darcy scanned the room for his wife and made his way towards her, refreshments in hand. He grabbed his own drinks and followed Darcy. “You need not walk so fast. Mrs. Darcy will not disappear.”

“You underestimate her elusiveness.”

The two soon reached Elizabeth, Jane, Caroline, and Louisa. Elizabeth smiled at Darcy as he handed her a beverage, and Bingley’s heart filled with a brief longing. Since becoming Mrs. Darcy, she had a certain glow to her, and Bingley thought she had never looked so beautiful as she did that night. Telling himself to snap out of it, he handed Jane and his sisters their own refreshments. Jane, too, looked lovely, he noticed. Her cheeks were flushed, whether from the dancing or something else, he did not know.

“My, Mr. Bingley, I have never seen a gentleman able to balance so many drinks at once,” remarked Elizabeth.

Bingley grinned. “I cannot leave my poor sisters parched.”

“An ideal brother, then,” said Elizabeth. “My dear Mr. Darcy, I am afraid your title is in contention.”

“Oh, I cannot ask for a better brother than Charles, but one cannot dispute that Mr. Darcy’s attentiveness to Miss Darcy is most admirable. How is Miss Darcy this evening, Eliza, Mr. Darcy?” asked Miss Bingley.

“Georgiana is keeping Lydia and my father company this evening. She gets on quite well with papa,” answered Elizabeth. Mr. Bennet appreciated Georgiana’s pianoforte skills, and Georgiana enjoyed learning how to play chess. Lydia was kept at home due to her behaviour with Wickham the week before, to her great displeasure. She was to complain to Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper, of her woes the entire night.

"That is an unusual pair," commented Miss Bingley.

"They are both quiet souls," said her brother.

"They also share a love for novels," Darcy stated wryly.

"Novels!" Bingley laughed. "I did not expect that of Mr. Bennet."

"Why Mr. Bingley, while you proclaim not to be a great reader, I have heard from your sisters that when you *do* read, there is a particular type of book you pick up," said Elizabeth.

Darcy raised an eyebrow at Bingley, who had turned pink. "Is that so?"

Bingley coughed. "It appears that I have been betrayed by my sisters."

"It is sweet that you read novels so you may discuss it with Caroline and Louisa," said Jane.

"I thank you for your compliment," replied Bingley, smiling at her. The strings started up again. "May I have the next dance, Miss Bennet?"

Jane blushed, and allowed Mr. Bingley to escort her to the line of dancers the second time that evening.

"I do hope that he has not fallen in love again," said Miss Bingley, watching the couple.

"Whyever not?" asked Elizabeth. Darcy placed a calming hand on her arm.

"Jane is a dear friend, Eliza, but you must admit it a little strange for him to transfer his affections from one sister to another," stated Mrs. Hurst.

"It is not too strange. True love is one thing, and infatuation another. You cannot disapprove of the former, especially concerning two wonderfully matched people."

"And what is your opinion, Mr. Darcy?" asked Miss Bingley.

"If Bingley's intentions towards the lady are serious, I will not interfere in his pursuit," said he.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst frowned. Both liked Jane Bennet, but would have preferred that their brother marry someone of a higher standing, or at least with a larger dowry. Alas, they did not want to offend the Darcys, so they dared not say their thoughts aloud. Even if Mr. Darcy might have agreed with them, Elizabeth would not have, and it was well known that the gentleman would not tolerate anything that upset his wife.

The Darcys soon decided that they would leave the assembly early. While the other attendants were disappointed to be missing the company of their former jewel of the county, they did not feel at all slighted. It was one of the perks of Elizabeth's condition, and again, Darcy was grateful for their future child.

"Bingley danced *twice* with Jane!" exclaimed Elizabeth in the

carriage.

“Yes, but I did not see either display great affection.”

“You did not observe them as frequently as I did.”

“I admit that is true.” Darcy had been occupied staring at Elizabeth most of the assembly. Even now in the carriage, he was appreciating her beauty.

“And you do not know Jane as well as I do. I know that she is well on her way to love, if she is not already.”

“I will believe it when I observe it myself.”

“You will see it soon enough. If not by the end of our time here, then when the Bingleys and my family come to Pemberley for the summer.”

“I suppose if they marry, I will gain Bingley as a brother.”

“Indeed. It is an improvement to Mr. Collins, is it not?” Elizabeth had that twinkle in her eye that Darcy found extremely tempting. He picked her up from the seat beside him and plopped her on his lap.

Later, the two descended the carriage slightly disheveled, hoping that those within Longbourn would attribute their appearances to have naturally occurred through dancing. They would have refreshed themselves, if they did not hear Lydia calling them from the other room.

“La, Lizzy, is that you? Come inside papa’s study! I am so bored.” When Elizabeth and Darcy entered, they found Georgiana and Mr. Bennet at a game of chess, and Lydia at the window on the other side of the room. “I knew it was you and Mr. Darcy, Lizzy! No one else would leave a ball early.”

“Your sister must have been tired, Lydia. It is normal in her state,” said Mr. Bennet.

“La! Lizzy used to be at least a little fun before she married.” Lydia looked accusingly at Darcy, then gestured to Elizabeth’s middle. “I hope my niece or nephew will not be so dull as the two of you.”

“How was the assembly?” asked Georgiana.

As Elizabeth spoke all about the evening to her and Lydia, Darcy intently observed the chess board. Realising his sister’s command over the game, he looked at Mr. Bennet in shock.

“Not a word, Mr. Darcy,” Mr. Bennet said gravely.

Darcy ignored him with great amusement. “You are doing very well, Georgiana.”

“Oh, sorry, brother, what was that?” asked she some seconds late, turning from Elizabeth and Lydia.

“I am amazed at your skills at the game.”

Georgiana blushed. “Mr. Bennet was kind to teach it to me.”

“You may have surpassed him yet.”

“Not today, I am afraid,” said Mr. Bennet. He finally moved one of

his pieces, leaning back satisfactorily after.

Georgiana stared at the board, for only a few moments, before moving her own piece. Mr. Bennet straightened, his eyes widened. Darcy caught his sister's and Elizabeth's eyes and exchanged smiles.

"You may be in need of more practice, papa, for there is a new prodigy in our midst," said Elizabeth.

"Now, now, Lizzy. The match is not over yet."

Georgiana ended up winning, though Mr. Bennet claimed to have gone easy on her. When they started another game, Mr. Bennet declaring that he would not make the mistake of underestimating his opponent again, Darcy and Elizabeth decided to retire. Lydia first huffed at her elder sister for not waiting up with her until the others returned from the assembly, then went on to say that she did not care for Lizzy's company in any case.

"If Georgiana were not my sister already, I would have stolen her from you," Elizabeth said to Darcy as he took the pins out of her hair. In the privacy of Elizabeth's old bedroom, which served as their current chamber, they had no qualms being each other's valet and lady's maid.

"That is kidnapping, Elizabeth. I would have had to punish you, if you went through with it," replied Darcy. He undid her gown, and after some struggle was rewarded with a bare shoulder, which he promptly kissed once, then twice, then thrice.

"Fitzwilliam, the house is still awake," Elizabeth weakly protested, though her hands moved behind her to caress him.

"Then we will have to be extra quiet," Darcy whispered in her ear, nipping it before he trailed his lips lower and lower.

Since his reconciliation with Darcy, Bingley had been calling daily at Longbourn. The sight of Bingley's smiling face in Mrs. Bennet's drawing room, or at the dinner table, or in the gardens, became quite normal. In fact, Mr. Bennet remarked one instance how the Bennets saw him more often than they saw Elizabeth and Darcy.

"It is good, I suppose, how Lizzy now has an escort for her long walks," spoke Mr. Bennet. "Though I am curious what draws you to Longbourn then, Mr. Bingley, if my son-in-law is off rambling the grounds with my Lizzy? Is it possible that you are secretly engaged to Miss Darcy after all?"

"Miss Darcy!" exclaimed Bingley. "I consider her a sister, sir! Not to mention, she is not yet out!"

"My apologies, Mr. Bingley, for jesting about an old rumour."

"An old rumour? Wherever from? Darcy will not be pleased."

Having observed Elizabeth's strange friendship with Miss Bingley

and Mrs. Hurst, Mr. Bennet decided to have compassion on Bingley's sisters. He told Bingley that it was mere speculative nonsense only created by the minds of bored countryside people, who knew what they spoke of was not true.

"I suppose if you are here for my Jane, I will not mind," Mr. Bennet then went on to say. Bingley, who was often found conversing with the eldest Bennet daughter on his recent trips to Longbourn, blushed.

Having been so used to Bingley's company, it was noticed and remarked upon by all of Longbourn when he had failed to call a second day in a row.

"Shall we go to Netherfield?" Darcy asked Elizabeth after hearing Mrs. Bennet's loud laments about Bingley's lack of appearance. "I am afraid he might be ill."

"What a coincidence; I have just received a note from Caroline asking for us to come," replied Elizabeth, waving the piece of paper she had been reading.

Netherfield was in a turmoil when Darcy and Elizabeth arrived, and they were glad that they did not bring anyone along with them.

"What is going on?" Darcy asked the butler as Elizabeth went to comfort a group of crying maids.

"There is a lot of uncertainty, sir. We are glad that you and Mrs. Darcy are here."

Darcy and Elizabeth were briskly escorted to the study, where Mr. Hurst and Miss Bingley were staring gravely at some papers and Mrs. Hurst appeared near tears. At their entrance, the women sighed in relief while Hurst sighed in exasperation.

"We were to keep this debacle to ourselves," Hurst muttered to his wife and sister.

Miss Bingley ignored him. "My dear Eliza! Mr. Darcy! You must save us from the mess Charles has made!"

"What has happened?" asked Elizabeth. "The servants are in unrest."

"It is that baron Charles had met this year," said Mrs. Hurst, tearing up again.

"He arrived here yesterday, threatening to take Netherfield. We are trying to figure out what trouble Charles is exactly in, but he left to town in a hurry with barely a word," explained Miss Bingley.

"And the Baron?" asked Darcy.

"He left only hours after Charles, but not before speaking to the staff. The audacity!" cried Mrs. Hurst. "Thank goodness your dowry is still intact, Caroline! Our father's fortune, wasted on this house whose only benefit is that it is near town, and if that is not enough, Charles's stupidity will make him lose it all!"

"I do not understand. I thought that Netherfield was let for a short

duration,” said Elizabeth.

“Apparently not,” grumbled Hurst, setting down several papers. “If these are legitimate, Bingley might have been convinced to make a substantial purchase.”

Darcy strode to take a look. When he was done reading, his countenance was most severe. He addressed Hurst, “We must go to town immediately.”

“I will pack now.”

To Elizabeth, Darcy apologised. “I am sorry we have to cut our visit to your family short.”

“They will understand,” said Elizabeth. “I will go to Longbourn for Georgiana and explain to everyone that we are needed for urgent business in town.”

“You cannot leave now, Eliza, not when Netherfield is in this state!” cried Miss Bingley.

“We would appreciate it if you would help us calm the staff,” added Mrs. Hurst, sniffing. “Caroline has only made them more fearful.”

Miss Bingley glared at her sister. “And Louisa’s nerves prohibit her from doing anything.”

“I will remain here for another day or two, then,” said Elizabeth. She turned to Darcy. “Is that agreeable to you?”

Darcy frowned. “I would rather you come with me.”

The Bingley sisters cried their protests.

“It will only be a short duration,” Elizabeth promised Darcy.

“If you truly must stay, then I will not try to persuade you otherwise. I only ask that you and Georgiana look after one another, and that your father accompany you both when you travel to town.”

“Those are easy terms to agree to.”

“If anything happens, write to me immediately,” continued Darcy, “though I hope that you will write to me regardless. You must also not overexert yourself at any time.”

Elizabeth was amused. “Yes, Mr. Darcy.”

“I cannot help but worry,” spoke he.

“It will only be a day or two! We will make sure no harm comes to Eliza,” said Miss Bingley.

Not half of an hour later, Darcy and Mr. Hurst were ready to depart. The latter made himself comfortable in the carriage while Darcy had a moment alone with his wife.

“I loathe to go without you,” said Darcy, holding both of Elizabeth’s hands in his. Setting aside propriety, he moved one of his hands to her belly. He ignored Hurst’s deliberate cough from inside the carriage. “Do take care of yourself, my love.”

“I will,” promised Elizabeth. “You must take care of yourself as well.”

Darcy nodded. He did not move, not wanting to part from her and her beautiful, big brown eyes. Hurst coughed again.

"I love you, Elizabeth," spoke Darcy.

"I love you too, Fitzwilliam. Do not worry; it will only be two days at most."

Darcy shocked everyone by gently kissing his wife's lips before ascending the carriage. He watched Elizabeth through the window as the coach rolled forward, not looking away until she was completely out of sight. When he finally situated himself more comfortably, he saw Hurst staring at him with a raised brow.

"What?" asked Darcy.

"Nothing," said Hurst. With no food, drink, or cards to distract him, however, the odd staring persisted.

"Get out with it, Hurst."

"I never thought that you would be a besotted husband."

"It is not like we were in the middle of a crowded street in London. I saw no reason to sacrifice my affections."

"Mrs. Darcy seems to inspire men to act out of their senses," commented Mr. Hurst. At Darcy's glower, he continued, "You must know that I never promoted the match between Bingley and Mrs. Darcy when she was simply Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Lovely as she was, she was too dowerless. If I had known that it was your goal to pursue her, I would have helped you in maintaining Bingley's friendship. I do not know if Bingley told you, but I had withheld a letter you wrote to him, and I must apologise for that."

Darcy was surprised that Hurst apologised to him at all, and was glad to accept it. "Think nothing of it. It was my own fault for not speaking to Bingley in the first place."

"Thank you, Darcy. If it matters, I had only wanted to keep peace in my house."

"I understand. In that regard, you are much like my father-in-law."

Hurst was mildly offended to be compared to such a man, which was exactly what Darcy intended. If Elizabeth were there, Darcy would have delighted in her eyes, which would have twinkled at his subtle jest. Sadly, he could only imagine her presence, and the remainder of the ride was filled with serious conversation as he and Hurst looked over Bingley's papers with sighs and grimaces.

Meanwhile at Netherfield, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst gathered all of the servants for a meeting in the main hall. The staff's anxiousness was evident, though they relaxed a little when they saw Elizabeth. Most had known her since before her marriage. When she had been Miss Elizabeth Bennet, they thought her lovely and kind. When she became Mrs. Darcy and remained as gracious as ever, they were in awe of her. Their respect was great, and they knew they could trust

her when it came to Netherfield, the Baron, and their positions.

The servants solemnly shared what the Baron had told them. He had implored them all to start finding positions elsewhere, for he would not need their employment when he would make Netherfield his own. Elizabeth was able to reassure them all that they would not have to deal with him again, and that his demands were illegitimate, but on the off chance that something did happen to the estate, they would have opportunities to work at Longbourn or any of her homes.

"Oh, thank you Miss Lizzy!" cried one of the tearful maids whose sister worked at Longbourn.

"She is *Mrs. Darcy*," corrected Miss Bingley.

The maid blushed, but revised her address and shared smiles with Elizabeth.

Apparently, the Baron had also already started to make physical changes to Netherfield during his brief visit. Some furniture had cleared, and other previously cobwebbed rooms oddly prepared.

"You did not know about any of this until now?" Elizabeth asked Miss Bingley.

"I reckon he had convinced some of the staff here to do his bidding without my knowledge." Miss Bingley sniffed in distaste. "I have a mind to dismiss his spies."

"It would not be wise to keep those not loyal to you," agreed Elizabeth.

"I thought I saw some servants who appeared more frightful than thankful when you reassured them that they would not have to see the Baron again," said Miss Bingley. "I will interview them first. I hope that you will be able to provide a second judgement."

"I will help, but let me send a note to Longbourn before then."

"You cannot find a way out of this," said the Baron, strolling into Bingley's study at the Hurst townhouse. "Do not worry, I did not force my way into the house. That snobby butler let me in after I handed him my card. Your brother should be mindful of the help he hires. Your own butler at Netherfield may be in need of a position soon, and he seems better trained."

"What are you doing here?" asked Bingley, glaring at the man.

"I'm here to tell you to stop scouring your papers," replied the Baron. "We could have been great friends, the two of us. I could have given you everything. Connections, great returns on investments, Mrs. Darcy –"

"What in the world were you thinking of when you approached her?"

"I was thinking of you!"

"I am not the type to have a relationship with a married woman, and Mrs. Darcy is especially not the type to even think about betraying her husband!"

"Do not deny that you would have been tempted if she was willing," said the Baron. "Even *I* would have been tempted, and I am not the one in love with her."

Bingley stiffened. Tempting as Elizabeth was, he would rather give up his entire fortune than betray her and Darcy. "You are a scoundrel. I do not know how I never saw through you before."

"Do not worry, for I have come to ease my conscience with an alternative for you. I will pull a few strings and liquidize several investments of yours so that you will have enough funds to buy an estate about half the size of Netherfield."

"I will not trust your word again," refused Bingley.

"Do you not want a house of your own? Does it not pain you to rely on your brother's generosity? Even here, you could barely call this your study. You do not have enough available funds to make your payments due to the estate, and your investments even leave you in debt to me. Netherfield will thus be in my care, and you must look elsewhere."

"Netherfield is still under my name."

"Yet when you will not be able to pay for it, whose ruin will become known? Who will trust that your near-spinster sister's dowry still exists? You need the money before the *ton* knows of your fall in fortune, and who else will lend you it?"

"Enough. I would appreciate it if you took your leave."

"Are you sure you want to ask this of me?"

"I am certain."

"Bingley –"

A new voice interrupted, "He asked you to leave."

The Baron smirked when he saw Hurst enter the room. When Darcy appeared right after, his smirk fell.

"I was just on my way. Mr. Bingley, Mr. Hurst, Mr. Darcy." The Baron bowed, sparing Darcy an almost frightened glance before heading out the door.

"So you have heard of my stupidity," said Bingley, sinking down in his chair when the door closed. "Tell me, are Caroline and Louisa at least unaware?"

"You were smart to escape to London from their screeching," grumbled Hurst.

Bingley sank down further in his seat. "It was not my intention to escape. I came here to find a way out of this mess. If I can find the right papers, the right contracts for my solicitor..."

"Tell us what to look for, Bingley. You will need our help, with how

disorganised everything here looks,” said Hurst.

“I have alerted my solicitor as well, if you need him,” spoke Darcy. “It may take a while to sort out your investments, so if you soon need to make a payment, you need not go to that despicable man. I will cover it.”

“You are too generous. While I assure you I will not go to him, I cannot ask that of you.”

“I am afraid I must insist. Consider it a loan.”

Tears formed in Bingley’s eyes. “Thank you, Darcy. And you, Hurst, thank you too.”

Darcy sighed as he looked at the empty pillow next to his head. It was as lonely as he, without the touch of Elizabeth. Short as the parting from his wife would be, he was not dealing with it well. How he had lived eight-and-twenty years without her was incredible. Hopefully, she would arrive at Darcy House on the morrow, but the letter he had received from her a few hours ago did not bode well on that regard. Netherfield needed their staff sorted out, and Elizabeth was too righteous to reject the Bingley sisters’ call for help. It was no wonder that the staff at Pemberley and Darcy House seemed happier than ever with her as mistress; Elizabeth was born to manage great houses.

One or two more days, he thought to himself. *Would Elizabeth mind if I sent her another letter?* He had already written her five pages to read, which she should receive upon waking up tomorrow morning. Half of the pages relayed information on what was occurring in London with Bingley’s debacle, and the other half was his expression of love for her. *What is Elizabeth doing now? Sleeping, hopefully. At least our little future Darcy will be keeping her company.*

The next day, Darcy met up with Bingley, Hurst, and the investigator they had hired to see what developments had been made overnight.

“Another client of mine has been trailing the Baron, so it was easy to connect the information we have had on him with what we gleamed from the details you gave us,” said the investigator.

“So he has truly been a scoundrel from the start,” bemoaned Bingley. “How could I not have known?”

“’Tis dangerous to out someone from a powerful family.”

Darcy asked, “What have you found?”

“He has been looking for an estate near London for a while. He needed a location to run his disreputable business at.”

“Disreputable business?”

The investigator elaborated, and the gentlemen gaped and gasped

and grimaced.

“My word,” said Hurst.

“Those poor women!” cried Bingley. “He wanted to make a business of *that*? And at Netherfield! Good heavens!”

“Netherfield Park was perfect. It was in the inconsequential countryside, yet it had a grandeur to it, and a proximity to London. Most of all, however, it would be under your name, Mr. Bingley, instead of his own.”

“So if he was caught, he would have made a scapegoat out of me,” stated Bingley.

“He is more deplorable than I have ever imagined,” said Darcy.

The investigator nodded, and continued to expand on the Baron’s illicit actions.

That afternoon and the next day, they met with the solicitors. Bingley’s investments with the Baron were surprising sound, both ethically and profitably. The only downside was that most could not be liquefied for several months at the latest, which was after several payments for Netherfield would have been due.

“Thank you again, Darcy, for your generosity,” spoke Bingley after the long day. “If not for you, I might have had to touch Caroline’s dowry.”

“That would have been a dreadful thing, especially now that she is closer to being left on the shelf,” commented Hurst. They were dining together at his townhouse, enjoying his favourite spread of decadent foods, as well as multiple decanters of wine.

“She is still young. Is she not about Miss Jane Bennet’s age? And it is outrageous to call Miss Bennet a spinster,” said Bingley.

Darcy brought his cup to his lips and raised an eyebrow. For the first time, he discerned that Elizabeth might have been right about there being potential between Bingley and her sister.

Hurst replied, “Miss Bennet is still unmarried, despite having two younger sisters that have wed, so there is something to say about that. She is like our sister, and you and I both have wanted Caroline wed since her entrance into society.”

Bingley set down the drink he held and frowned. “I do wonder why she has never had any decent suitors. Most who have approached me in the past have been over twice her age. Then again, Miss Bennet is all that is lovely, yet she did not appear to have any suitors either.”

“She is dowerless and connectionless,” explained Hurst. He gulped his wine. “She cannot even inherit her father’s small estate. Although, her connections *have* increased since her sister married you, Darcy. Perhaps Mrs. Darcy will share to her sisters and Caroline the secret of capturing good, wealthy gentlemen. She certainly knows the art well, having married with nothing to her name.”

“Not so many gentlemen would marry for affection as Darcy did.”

“They are unwise. I can attest that it is worth marrying for love,” said Darcy.

“Though there must be some downs. Distance from your beloved, for instance, has made you more miserable than usual,” stated Hurst, his speech slightly slurred. He would have never insulted Darcy if he were not so in his cups.

“I hope to be as miserable if I ever marry and business takes me away from my wife,” declared Bingley.

“If you are in want of a wife, I suggest that you marry off our sister first. I imagine that the future Mrs. Bingley would rather not have to deal with Caroline all day.”

Bingley considered it, and with the help of the wine, ultimately agreed. “If only the Bennets had a son. The family is handsome, so he would have most likely been a dashing, fine man, but even if he were not, he would be heir to an estate. He would have been a good prospect for Caroline.”

“Perhaps Mr. Collins has a cousin,” said Darcy.

Bingley and Hurst laughed.

“Yes, someone like Mr. Collins would also do well for Caroline,” mused Bingley. “The fawning, I think, she will like best. His scent may be a problem, but Caroline does like to have her way. She would have him smelling like that awful perfume of her in no time.”

“Excuse me?!” a screech at the dining room’s doors startled the men.

“Caroline?” Bingley asked, his flushed face turning white. “What are you doing here?”

“Lizzy!” Darcy stunned everyone as he rose from his seat and strode to the door, embracing Elizabeth when he got to her. “How I have missed you, my love. Are you well?”

“It has only been two days. Yes, I am well.” Elizabeth smiled up at her husband.

“Two days too long.”

Hurst coughed loudly in the background. Darcy only tightened his hold on his wife and bowed to press his forehead against hers.

Elizabeth spoke, “I have missed you too, Fitzwilliam, but let us sit at the table. We are shocking the others.”

She was correct. While Bingley and Georgiana were practically beaming at them, the Hursts and Miss Bingley gaped at the blatant impropriety. Darcy relented, though he held her close to him still as he escorted her and Georgiana to the seats near his, newly appeared at the table thanks to the footmen.

“Speaking of scents, I can tell from your breath that you are a little imbibed,” Elizabeth whispered to him in amusement.

“If I was truly imbibed like Hurst, I would have done what I had wanted to do and kiss your impertinent, lovely lips, and you would have tasted instead of smelt my supposed drunkenness,” replied Darcy, sitting down. It was meant to be a whisper, but came out loudly enough for all to hear, based on the expressions around the table. He attempted to mollify his embarrassment by increasing that of the others. “The entrance took us by surprise; with none to introduce you all into the room, and with no note received in advance, we were taken off guard by the exclamation.”

However offended Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were at such a snide remark about their own lapse in manners, they did not reply in equal unkindness – at least to Mr. Darcy. To Mr. Hurst and Mr. Bingley, they directed their scorn.

“I decided against sending a note, Mr. Hurst, for we were so busy at Netherfield, and by the time we were to depart, the missive would have only preceded us but a few minutes. From Mr. Darcy’s earlier letter to Eliza, we were aware that you and the gentlemen would dine at our house, and I quite expected you to indulge yourself and command the cook to make much more food than he ought – plenty for us ladies, if we were to arrive during the middle of the meal. We were certainly eager to come to town as quickly as we could,” spoke Mrs. Hurst. Her husband’s spoon froze half way between his plate and his mouth. Ultimately, he figured he could stand any chastisement for eating a bit too much, and the spoon resumed its path upwards. As Mrs. Hurst had wanted her husband to take better care of his figure, she was exasperated.

“I apologise for my outburst earlier,” said Miss Bingley, her nose in the air. “I did not expect to hear such a *jest* from you, Charles.”

As Bingley tried to appease his sister, Darcy asked Elizabeth and Georgiana where Mr. Bennet had gone.

“Papa did not want to come inside. He has gone to Darcy House, where a room should be prepared for him. I believe he wants to retire after scouring the library for a book,” explained Elizabeth.

Darcy nodded, satisfied that his father-in-law had done his duty and escorted the ladies after all. “Will he stay long?”

“Only for the night.”

“He will be free to take with him any book then. How was the journey here? Were you both comfortable?”

Elizabeth and Georgina assured him that they were.

“You should not fret so much, Fitzwilliam,” said Elizabeth. “Though I admit, a part of me enjoys feeling so cared for.”

On the other side of the table, Bingley cried, “I am sorry, Caroline! I have said so already.”

“You have a lot of things to be sorry for these days, Charles. You

cannot apologise enough,” hissed Miss Bingley.

The Darcys exchanged amused glances. Throughout the entire meal, Miss Bingley seemed on the brink of lashing out at her brother. Bingley was evidently frightened of being left alone with her, and on multiple occasions signaled to the Darcys that he would love for them to stay at the Hurst townhouse as long as they liked. Unfortunately for him, Darcy and Elizabeth were eager to have a more private reunion at Darcy House. On their way out, Bingley was heard apologising over and over again as Miss Bingley rivaled Mrs. Bennet in her shrieks.

Chapter 18

Following the resolution of the Bingley-Baron issue, the Darcys enjoyed several peaceful months at Pemberley.

Then the Bennets arrived.

They came an entire week early, Mrs. Bennet citing that her dear Mrs. Darcy needed her in case the baby arrived early, which she considered a serious possibility given how short the Darcys' engagement had been. Along with the Bennets were the Collinses. Unfortunately, the Gardiners were courteous enough to travel when they said they would; it was a shame, for they were the ones the Darcys were looking forward to hosting the most.

"My dear Mrs. Darcy! Mistress of all this!" cried Mrs. Bennet multiple times upon entering the grand home.

"La Lizzy, you did not say how rich you really are – oh my, you are so round! Will you heal quickly enough to host a ball before we leave?" exclaimed Lydia, Kitty giggling next to her.

Mr. Bennet merely observed the estate in awe, not at all inclined to correct the manners of his wife and youngest daughters. Mr. Collins's effusions were as unnecessary as Mrs. Bennet's, and Mrs. Collins's remarks were no less unseemly, few as they were. Even Jane did not leave a good impression. She had a cold, but insisted that she was well when she was clearly not, and sneezed every other minute.

Darcy swore he heard one of the footmen questioning under his breath how in the world Mrs. Darcy came from such a family.

Once the Bennets and Collins went up to their rooms to refresh themselves, Elizabeth turned to Darcy and Georgiana to apologise. "I am so sorry. I know you were both looking forward to our last week of solitude. Even knowing my family well, I did not expect them to come so early, and without notice."

"All will be well, Elizabeth. I only care that you have peace and happiness." Darcy squeezed Elizabeth's hand in comfort. He then frowned at Georgiana, who was fidgeting and appearing more nervous than usual. "What is wrong, Georgiana?"

"It is all my fault," she blurted out.

"What do you mean?"

"In one of my correspondences with Kitty, she wrote to me expressing how she wished they would leave for Derbyshire sooner than later, for Hertfordshire was less eventful without the militia. I

said that I would like to see her soon, and that Lizzy is so perfect as Pemberley's mistress that if all of her family arrived within the week, everything would be prepared," Georgiana explained in a hurry. "I did not think that my words were to be taken seriously."

"Oh, Georgiana, it is not your fault at all," said Elizabeth, smiling reassuringly. "If the blame is to be placed on anyone, it is to be with my father. I would not be shocked to learn that he was planning on surprising us even before your letters with Kitty."

Georgiana sighed in relief.

Elizabeth continued, "I may need your help around the estate, however. I am not as light on my feet as I was before, and my family can be a handful."

"I would be delighted to help," said Georgiana. She looked at Elizabeth's belly, but unlike Lydia, it was with appreciation instead of amusement.

Elizabeth spoke, "The babe is moving now. Would you like to feel it?"

Georgiana nodded and placed a gentle palm on the belly. She had a slight obsession with her future niece or nephew, from practically taking over decorating the nursery to buying enough clothes for ten babes instead of one.

"I am glad our little Darcy will have such a devoted, talented aunt. If I were alone, the child would grow up learning how to play and embroider very ill," said Elizabeth.

"You will never be alone," spoke Darcy.

"Yes, even if the worst should happen, I have no doubt that your spirit would not leave me alone for a second," Elizabeth teased.

Darcy nodded. "Certainly so."

Ultimately, the week went by without any large incidents. Mr. Bennet spent nearly all his time in the library. Mrs. Bennet was more of a prominent presence, but Darcy started to appreciate her better as she pampered over Elizabeth's well-being. Elizabeth was a bit upset that she could not tend to Jane, for Darcy, Mrs. Bennet, and Mrs. Reynolds were adamant that she stay away from her. Until Jane recovered from her cold, Elizabeth was not to risk her own health, or the health of the babe. Mary often played the pianoforte, much to the chagrin of the house, but she at least managed Mr. Collins as her audience in most of her musical endeavours; between her playing and Mr. Collins's speeches, most preferred the former. Kitty was thankfully subdued by Georgiana's influence, and while Lydia was still boisterous, she at least did not break anything.

By the time the Gardiners, Bingleys, and Hursts arrived, Jane was healed, and Elizabeth was delighted to not only be able to sit with her, but to see her relationship develop with Mr. Bingley. As Darcy loathed

to leave Elizabeth's side with the approaching birth, Bingley and Jane found contentment, and perhaps a little more, when they turned to each other for company. Often they were talking in a corner of a room, or riding together. The best part of it all was that Mrs. Bennet was too distracted by Elizabeth's confinement to comment on her eldest daughter and the amiable gentleman. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were more observant, but they could hardly have objections to a match that would create familial ties with the Darcys. Granted, they would have preferred their brother married to Georgiana, yet they were not so unwise as to suggest *that* again.

The roles were much in reverse, not only where the Bingley sisters and the Bennets were concerned, but also in relation to Elizabeth, Jane, and their conversations about Mr. Bingley.

"Jane, he is in love with you. I know I have said so in the past, and I know I have been wrong, but I am sure of it this time," insisted Elizabeth. The women and men had separated post-dinner, and the sisters were in a private corner in the drawing room.

"We get along well, but it is nothing more than friendship," denied Jane. "You forget that for the majority of our acquaintance he was in love with you."

"But he is not anymore. We are all certain about that."

"He cannot love a married woman, let alone his best friend's wife. He is too honourable, Lizzy. If you were not married, then his feelings may still be relevant."

"Indeed, he would have not acted upon them if they still remained, because he *is* honourable, but the fact of the matter is that his feelings *did* wane. Substantially, Jane. I am glad for it, and I believe you should be as well." Elizabeth placed a hand on Jane's. "Have I misread you?"

"Oh Lizzy, it is just..."

Squeezing Jane's hand, Elizabeth spoke, "It is understandable if Mr. Bingley's previous affections have made you incapable of returning his current ones. I will not speak further if that is the case, or if you are adamant that you do not love him. However, if your feelings are strong... Oh, Jane! I cannot help but think that you are projecting your own fears when you speak against Mr. Bingley caring deeply for you."

"I do not care that he loved you first. I do not care at all!" cried Jane as quietly as she could without drawing the attention of the others in the room. "I only do not want to be disappointed, so I dare not hope. I dare not even speak of it at all."

"My dear sister, if it makes you uneasy, I will cease to speak of it after these last words. I will only say that I truly believe that happiness is in your near future," said Elizabeth. The doors of the

drawing room opened, and as the men entered, she smiled and squeezed Jane's hand a last time.

Darcy immediately appeared at Elizabeth's side, wordlessly asking after her well-being. Bingley was behind him, and went to stand next to Jane. Thinking it unwise to send Jane a glance that spoke of the blatantness of Bingley's affections, Elizabeth signaled to Darcy instead.

"It is not as if I do not see their feelings," said Darcy later, when she was at the pianoforte and he was turning her pages. "I now fully believe that they like each other. That they love one another is yet to be determined. While Bingley is attentive to your sister, to my displeasure he still glances at *you* time to time. Your sister may bestow on him many smiles, but she smiles at everyone. Of course I must bow to your superior judgement in regard to your sister, but from my own observations, I would not expect much from either of them. Though I doubt that he would, if Bingley proposes, I will not try to dissuade him. It will behove me to not meddle in his affairs of the heart again, regardless of my wishes for him to marry for love."

"Not every love is as ours, Fitzwilliam. Theirs may be the quiet sort, but it is still love, and they would be happy together," said Elizabeth.

"How blessed I was to find you." Disregarding the room, Darcy placed a hand on her rounded middle. He smiled when he felt a kick.

"The babe is coming! The babe is coming! My dear Mr. Bennet, quit your books, your grandchild is coming! Early, just as I expected! I *knew* there was a reason why they wed so quickly. I do not know whether to thump Lizzy or praise her. Oh! Mr. Darcy! You must not enter the birthing chamber! Mrs. Darcy will be fine without you – she is my child, after all. You must not worry that the worst will happen, because it will not. Mr. Bennet! Tell him so!" Mrs. Bennet woke the entire house with her exclamations, and Elizabeth regretted telling Mrs. Reynolds to alert her of the birthing.

"Madam –" Darcy was cut off as Elizabeth squeezed his hand incredibly hard. A yelp was heard, but whether it came from Elizabeth or Darcy was to be seen. Darcy cleared his throat and tried again. "Madam, I appreciate your concern, but I will not leave my wife."

Mrs. Bennet was aghast. She turned to Elizabeth and the midwife for support on the matter. However, Elizabeth was keen on having Darcy near, and the midwife did not want to get replaced for speaking against the master of Pemberley.

It was Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner who finally persuaded the couple to part the distance of a door between them. Mrs. Gardiner cited that it would be too crowded, with her, Mrs. Bennet, the midwife and the like in the birthing chamber, and a reluctant but fairly reasonable

Darcy was led by Mr. Gardiner to pace in the adjacent sitting room.

Their separation lasted until Elizabeth's first ear-piercing scream. Darcy took that as his signal to barge through the door, to the displeasure of all of those within save for his wife.

"Incorrigible man!" cried Elizabeth, but she was pleased that he was there.

Bingley entered the parlour where Elizabeth's sisters sat waiting anxiously. He expected worry, but not of the level he found.

"Mrs. Darcy will be well. Darcy and her own spirit will not allow otherwise," he reassured. Jane started crying, and Bingley panicked. "What is wrong?"

"It is nothing," said Jane.

Lydia snorted, and Bingley frowned. Glancing around, he noticed a missing sister. "Is Miss Kitty well?"

It was Georgiana's turn to sob.

"What is wrong?" Bingley asked again.

"Kitty is –"

"This is a family matter," Mary interjected Lydia.

Lydia scoffed. "Do you think papa is going to find them? I do not know if he can ride three miles without stopping to rest."

"I trust Mr. Bingley," said Georgiana. Bingley smiled at her and handed both her and Jane handkerchiefs.

"Thank you," whispered Jane.

"Now what has happened to Miss Kitty?" asked Bingley.

"She has been abducted by Mr. Wickham!" Lydia spoke before Mary could stop her.

"What?!"

"There is a note and everything!" Lydia took the missive Mary was holding behind her back and presented it to Bingley. "He wants Lizzy's money, that mercenary scoundrel! Though I am surprised he did not kidnap Miss Bingley. *She* has a twenty-thousand-pound dowry."

Bingley felt as if he too needed to cry after reading the note, and was glad that his sisters, Hurst, and Mr. Collins were not present, for their reactions would not have been helpful in the slightest.

Kitty and I have eloped. We will be back in a fortnight.

P. Young

"Good heavens! When was this? Who is P. Young? What of Mr. Wickham?"

"Kitty went upstairs to get a shawl, but she never returned. We found the note in her place, and told papa half of an hour ago," said

Jane.

“Lydia and Miss Darcy believe that there is no one with that name, that P. Younge is Mr. Wickham attempting to play the roles of abductor and saviour so Lizzy and Mr. Darcy will be forced to pay his debts and more when he is found with Kitty,” explained Mary. “It is a sound theory. You must know, Mr. Bingley, that Kitty would never run away with a man. Miss Darcy believes that he is using the name of her former companion’s brother. She suspects he was able to get inside through the secret passages and the servant areas, while they were distracted by the announcement of the birthing.”

“I have been told of his wildness. I have no doubt that your theory is correct,” said Bingley. A million plans raced through his mind.

Georgiana spoke, “I know brother would be able to help, but with Lizzy giving birth...”

“They cannot know about this, at least not now. Darcy is too stressed, and to even think about telling Mrs. Darcy the news right now – there is nothing more wicked. Fear not. I will find Miss Kitty and return her back to you all, before they would notice anything is amiss. I must,” promised Bingley.

“Oh, thank you Mr. Bingley!” Jane’s grateful eyes met Bingley’s own, and amidst the turmoil he allowed himself, for a brief second, to feel a strange, unknown hope.

Minutes later, he was on his horse, riding in the dark and determined to be back before sunrise.

It did not take long for him to reach Mr. Bennet, who appeared equal parts grim, tired, and relieved to see him.

“The trail left by a carriage looks fresh enough to be from them. I have been trying to catch up to it,” said Mr. Bennet, not wasting a moment.

Bingley observed the indented ground Mr. Bennet referenced, barely noticeable under the dim moonlight, and nodded. “I will go ahead then. I will be faster.”

Mr. Bennet gave his thanks.

“I will find them,” promised Bingley.

He repeated those words to himself for what felt both like seconds and an eternity, until he came across the sorry excuse of a carriage that held Mr. Wickham, Kitty, and the footman driving the thing.

“Stop the carriage!”

“Mr. Bingley!” cried Kitty in relief. Wickham cursed loudly enough for all to hear.

“Do not worry, Miss Kitty! You will be safe!” Again, Bingley commanded, “Stop the carriage, Mr. Wickham!”

The wheels stopped, and Bingley immediately was at the vehicle’s door. A wave of protectiveness overcame him as he saw Kitty’s

frightened form, wrapped in a flimsy blanket. It was no wonder why Wickham chose her, out of all of Elizabeth's single sisters, to abduct. Kitty was slight, almost fragile, compared to the likes of Jane, Lydia, and Georgiana, and it must not have taken much force to physically get her into the carriage. Bingley held out his hand to her, and she accepted. When she descended, he placed his coat around her.

Wickham tried to explain, "I know what it may seem like, but I played no part in this. I have been trying to convince Miss Kitty not to elope with Mr. Younge."

"That is not Mr. Younge," stated Bingley, glaring at the wagon's third occupant. "He may not be wearing his uniform, but I recognise him as one of Pemberley's footmen."

"I have been threatened," spoke the footman hurriedly. "Wickham forced me to play the role, to escort Miss Kitty north – else he ruin my sister."

"So it was you who placed the note in Miss Kitty's room? It was you who forced her out of Pemberley's safety?" Bingley was appalled. The footman paled. "Darcy will deal with you later, and I would not look forward to it, if I were you."

"Miss Kitty's reputation is in danger. She must marry soon regardless," said Wickham.

"If she marries, it will not be to *you*. The situation is not as dire as you believe. As far as everyone is or will be concerned, Miss Kitty is still at Pemberley," replied Bingley.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Bingley. You did not marry the lovely Miss Elizabeth Bennet, for that distinction belongs to my old friend Darcy. Thus, Miss Kitty is not your sister, and is not under your protection –"

"No, but she is under mine." Mr. Bennet appeared, jumping down from his horse.

"Papa!"

"Kitty, my child, are you well? Did they hurt you?" Mr. Bennet scoured her for injury, and sighed in relief when he found none.

"I will make sure that Mr. Wickham and his accomplice are dealt with," said Bingley. "You should take Miss Kitty back to the estate."

Mr. Bennet nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Bingley. I would like an audience with these scoundrels, and I believe my son-in-law Darcy would as well, within the next few days, but for now, I hope that they will not give you too much trouble. Come, Kitty."

Before she got on her father's horse, Kitty curtsied to Mr. Bingley and whispered, "Thank you, sir, for rescuing me. I know I should not say, but I had always wanted you for a brother. Even though he is richer, I was a little disappointed when Lizzy chose Mr. Darcy. However, with Jane in love with you, perhaps I can still hope."

"Come along now, Kitty," said her father.

Kitty curtsied a last time, and she and Mr. Bennet were gone, Bingley left with Wickham, the footman, and a fast-beating heart.

Chapter 19

“He is so fat!” Kitty giggled, placing a finger on her nephew’s cheek. She was, by all means, recovered from the terrible incident with Wickham. It was not so surprising, as she, along with Lydia, always did have a bit of nonchalance to her.

“Master Bennet and his brother are smaller than single babes,” corrected Mrs. Bennet. She and her daughter cooed at the Darcy heir in Georgiana’s arms. “Yet, they are both the handsomest creatures I have ever seen!”

Across the room, Elizabeth held Bennet’s twin brother, Charles. His namesake watched as Darcy’s brooding form fussed over them in the most amusing way possible. Their love could not have been more on display, and they were not even stealing kisses, as Bingley had caught them doing from time to time.

Darcy was soon called away by Mr. Bennet, no doubt to discuss Mr. Wickham and the rogue footman. The debacle had taken place two days ago, and Darcy and Elizabeth had been furious when they were told what had occurred. If not for the happiness and distraction that came with the twins, Pemberley would have been a miserable place to be indeed. Instead, it was blooming with life. It helped that Mrs. Bennet, the Hursts, Miss Bingley, and Mr. Collins were still unaware of the attempted kidnapping. They would remain in ignorance even if Lydia could help it, which Bingley thought was a somewhat surprising development.

Seeing Elizabeth standing alone with little Charles compelled Bingley to walk over. They never had a moment of their own together since she became Mrs. Darcy, he realised. Their interactions had otherwise been as amiable as ever, but he wondered whether things would be awkward when others were removed. To her, he never bore resentment. He still esteemed her. He still thought her beautiful. In fact, she was at the moment the most angelic sight he had ever seen, carrying little Charles as if it was the most natural thing in the world, the light from the window making her dark features more golden than brown. Most stunning were her eyes, which embodied the strongest feelings of mirth and love. Her magnificent eyes were directed at little Charles, and when she looked up at him, they retained their powerful, love-filled expression. For a final moment, Bingley allowed himself to imagine Elizabeth as his own wife, and little Charles his own son.

"I hope he grows up to be just like his godfather," spoke Elizabeth with a glowing smile.

His imaginings were not to be. Elizabeth was Mrs. Darcy. Little Charles was his godson, and not his son in reality. Little Charles chose that moment to open his eyes and stare at him, revealing the remarkable shape of Elizabeth's eyes, combined with the signature colour of Darcy's. No, his imaginings were not to be, but he was, with his eyes wide open, content.

"Your praise is too much," replied Bingley, smiling back softly. "It has been clear in the last months that I have a ridiculous amount of flaws."

"I have never seen a man without an astounding number of flaws, and most of them do not acknowledge them at all. You are a good man, Mr. Bingley, and I will not have you demean yourself." There was a glint in Elizabeth's eyes. "I wish I could say the same about ladies, but there exists Jane, whose few flaws include being too nice."

Some distance behind Elizabeth and little Charles, Bingley observed Jane smiling as she conversed with his sisters. When she snuck a glance at him, he held her gaze, and the two smiled widely at each other, like a pair of fools. Jane's attentions were soon diverted by his sisters again, and Bingley turned towards Elizabeth, who looked at him knowingly.

"You have always understood me well," said he.

"Not always," she replied. "Did you know that I thought you partial to her months ago?"

"Perhaps you were on to something, even if I was not. You may have known me better than I knew myself, for believing what would have been good for me." Bingley laughed as little Charles slobbered over Elizabeth's gown, and handed over a handkerchief. "I must apologise to you. It must have been uncomfortable for you to receive my attentions."

"Surely it is I who must apologise. I should have been more direct with my wishes, and less ignorant of your intentions. I believed what I had wanted to believe, despite being warned otherwise."

"I fear I disagree; you must not apologise, and you must not have regrets. It has all worked out nicely at the end. Truly, I had wished for so long that Darcy would find someone to love, and now that I see him with you, I cannot think of a more perfect match. I have never seen him happier." Bingley cleared his throat. "I have been meaning to ask you something."

Elizabeth smiled. "Nothing terrible, I hope. You need not look so frightened."

"I know I must sound like a cad, asking the lady I had admired her blessing to ask for her sister's hand in marriage. My feelings have

grown for her with an unexpected force, and I have been told that she feels the same. I understand if you do not approve, however, and I will promise you that I will not pursue Miss Bennet if you do not believe it best.”

“Charles,” said Elizabeth. Bingley startled when he realised she was addressing himself, and not his godson. Hope bloomed at the familiarity; it was as if she was referring to him as a brother already. He was not disappointed when she continued to say, “You do not need my blessing, but of course I will give it to you. How could I not, when you have done so much for Kitty, for our family? And even if you did not, you are a good gentleman, who has captured my sister’s heart. That you and Jane will marry for love – few things could make me happier.”

Elated, Bingley could barely control crying out. “Thank you, Lizzy. Thank you!”

Around the card table, Darcy and Bingley gaped at Elizabeth, who was looking very pleased at herself. Darcy’s astonishment soon transformed into a passionate gaze of admiration, while Bingley threw down his cards, jaw still dropped.

“Ten enormous wins in a row is no fluke,” stated Bingley.

Darcy leant back in his chair. “You were not so good when we played the evenings after our wedding.”

“I have learned a few tricks from Georgiana,” said Elizabeth.

“Georgiana?” Beyond teaching her, Darcy did not recall them playing enough for her to develop any profound ability.

“Her skills are phenomenal beyond the pianoforte and chess. She truly is a most accomplished lady.”

“I am astounded,” said Bingley. “Having heard Miss Darcy’s playing, seen her paintings, conversed with her in several languages – I am seriously impressed that she has the capacity to be so skilled in so many other things.”

Darcy was not a little proud of his sister. The trio played another round, and again, Elizabeth won.

“It is decided, then,” said Bingley. “You will be the one to defeat Hurst.”

Mr. Hurst had offended them all by constantly referring to little Charles as a spare. While little Charles was a second son, they were not pleased at the dismissive appellation. Mr. Hurst deserved to be humbled, and there was no better way for such an occurrence than to beat him as his own favourite card games.

“I may have had favourable outcomes against the both of you, but Mr. Hurst is different competition,” said Elizabeth. “We can always

have Georgiana take him to task. She is the better player, and I know that she does not like little Charles being mocked so.”

“Hurst becomes too vulgar when he is in his cups for Georgiana to be present,” said Darcy.

Bingley added, “And we do need him inebriated for our plan to work.”

“I thought him more functional in that state, where cards are concerned.”

“It depends on what he drinks. Do not worry, for Darcy and I will make sure he is poured the correct beverage.”

“How mischievous we are!” Elizabeth had rarely schemed in her lifetime, despite her playful nature. The discovery that it was not unusual for Darcy and Bingley to innocuously plot against others was very amusing to her. She was further surprised, but not unhappy, that they included her in their boyish ways. After all, neither her little Bennet nor her little Charles were to be ridiculed by anyone. The dynamics between her, Darcy, and Bingley had quickly settled into something new, and something strong. They made a great team, and if Hurst knew what was in his near future, he should be frightened.

“We need to go over the plan again,” spoke Darcy.

“Fastidious as always!” said Bingley.

“I merely do not want to make a fool of myself.”

“*You* scarcely have a role to play, the terrible actor you are.”

“Do not look so dismal, Fitzwilliam,” said Elizabeth. “We would not have you any other way.”

Bingley nodded. “I am in complete agreement. Darcy, your pathetic stage skills never fail to be great entertainment. I remember once we were so bored that when I asked you to perform a play, you indulged me.” To Elizabeth, he exclaimed, “I nearly drowned myself laughing! He will not perform again for me, but he may for you, if you ask.”

“I have read for Elizabeth plenty of times,” stated Darcy.

“Oh, but reading a play is not the same as performing one,” said Elizabeth. She loved listening to Darcy reading to her in his deep, smooth voice in the evenings. Nonetheless, she equally enjoyed capturing her husband in his silly moments, rare as they were.

“We shall perform together, then, if that is your wish.”

“It is. I am sure our sons will look forward to it as well.”

“That is a good idea. We must surround them with good literature early on.”

“With you two as their parents, the twins will certainly be the greatest of readers by the time they are a mere five years of age,” said Bingley. “Your library will be well-used indeed.”

Elizabeth commented, “It already is. Papa spends all of his hours in there, and his praise is enormous to the extent that he cannot claim

that Mr. Collins is his favourite son-in-law any longer.”

“Mr. Collins is his favourite son-in-law?” Bingley was shocked. He studied Darcy, as if trying to figure out what was wrong with his person.

“Papa has a particular sense of humour,” said Elizabeth. “You may see that more clearly for yourself in the days to come. In the presence of family, papa has no qualms speaking with enough sarcasm to offend an entire village.”

“He is like Caroline, then,” spoke Bingley with a laugh.

A few hours later, the trio left the drawing room with grins on their faces, and large notes to be used for little Charles’s future. Inside, Hurst was left to be consoled by his food and drink.

Darcy melted at sight of Elizabeth in their bed with little Bennet and Charles. He had never been so frightened as he had during the birthing, and seeing them all safe and sound was incandescent joy. What a surprise little Charles had been, but Elizabeth was healthy, and Georgiana in her excitement had prepared enough for ten little Darcys, let alone two. Truly, nothing could have been more perfect.

“We might even be happier than my mother,” said Elizabeth.

“Indeed. If I did not know any better, Bennet is the future king of England, and Charles is also a prince. And it is just not your mother who treats them like they are royalty; Mrs. Reynolds is as bad, and Georgiana continues to be a doting aunt.” Darcy went under the bed covers, kissing his sons on their foreheads and Elizabeth on her lips. “Not to mention yourself.”

“You are as indulgent! But they are only a few days old, and will not turned out spoiled if we love them and pamper them every second for the time being.”

“They will not become spoiled. They are Darcys. We will give them good principles, guide them with love and kindness, and hopefully they will grow to become like you.”

“I, for one, hope that they grow up to be like their father. They will certainly look like you; we can see it in their eyes, and nose, and lips. Bennet already has mastered your frown.” Elizabeth laughed as Darcy nipped her ear. “What has been decided regarding Mr. Wickham and his accomplice?”

Darcy grimaced. The meetings concerning the villains had, after several long days, finally concluded. It had been arduous, to say the least. “Wickham should not have been in Derbyshire in the first place. He will answer to his commander, which may mean a harsher punishment than any magistrate would have accomplished. It is the credit of Bingley. How I commend him! If not for him, Wickham

would still be prowling about, targeting our family and undeniably many more. As for the footman, I am grieved that such a character had been under our employ. He has been dismissed without reference. I would have been harsher, but his claim that he was threatened by Wickham's affair with his sister was true."

"It is a great shame that he chose to follow Mr. Wickham's orders instead of confiding in you for help."

"Mrs. Reynolds has implied that since marrying you, I am perceived as less intimidating and taciturn. I hope that it means that the staff will be more inclined to speak their concerns," said Darcy. "I know that several servants and tenants have already opened up to you, my beautiful, gracious love. You are simply, as you have been called before, a jewel. Thank you, Elizabeth Darcy, for everything."

Elizabeth lifted her head for a kiss, and Darcy readily granted it.

Grinning, Elizabeth spoke, "Bingley is going to propose to Jane."

Darcy raised an eyebrow. "I am slightly surprised."

"Despite my predicting the event months ago?"

"I admit to watching you so often that I have been less observant of others than I normally am. You must be thrilled at the news."

"Completely thrilled! He was so kind as to ask for my blessing. Fitzwilliam, you could not have a better friend, and I hope that you will accept him as a brother."

"I am only disappointed that he did not ask for *my* blessing."

"It serves you right," teased Elizabeth.

"I named a son after him! Is that not enough?" Darcy kissed Elizabeth before she could answer. "Alas, I will accept him as a brother. I look forward to it, in fact. He is not only my dearest friend besides yourself, but a recent hero."

"Kitty cannot stop speaking of him. I daresay she half wants to marry Bingley herself, though she is much too young, and he and Jane much too in love. What a fine couple Jane and Bingley will be! They will be smiling all the time, and we will be laughing, and the only shame will be that they will have to reside in Netherfield, the grand distance of three miles from mama." Elizabeth snuggled closer to Darcy. "*You* are a hero as well, my love, no matter what you may believe. Besides your daily honourable acts, you found Mr. Collins so Mary would not be jilted, and you saved Bingley from ruination by the despicable Baron. Netherfield would have been lost without you, and who knows how many innocents you saved by preventing the Baron's operations."

"Netherfield," pondered Darcy.

Elizabeth looked up curiously. "Is something the matter with Netherfield?"

"Only that it is, like you have said, three miles from your mother.

Bingley may last a year, but surely not more. I know we would not last three months.”

“You are brave to insult mama, in my presence no less.”

“I was merely repeating your sentiments.”

“I was not so direct with my insult!” Elizabeth laughed. Little Bennet and Charles smiled in their sleep.

“I dearly love hearing your laugh, and it appears our sons do as well,” spoke Darcy.

“It is a good thing,” said Elizabeth, “that I dearly love to laugh.”

It was true, and Darcy and their children were always the ones who made her laugh the brightest.

Chapter 20

Upon hearing the news of Mr. Bingley and Jane's engagement, Mrs. Bennet nearly fainted from her happiness. Her life was complete. Her Elizabeth was married to one of the richest men of England, and had given birth to two – two! – healthy sons. Her Mary, whom she had fears of becoming a spinster like Lady Lucas's eldest daughter, was married to the heir of Longbourn. Her Jane was engaged to a rich, most amiable man, whom her neighbours in Hertfordshire had all thrown their daughters at. Her Lydia and Kitty were surely to capture rich men in the future, but for the time being, Mrs. Bennet delighted in having them with her. Still, for all of her unmistakable joy, Mr. Bennet was the one most glad that he would be gaining Mr. Bingley as a son.

It came full circle to Mr. Bennet in the month of October, when everyone was in Hertfordshire for Mr. Bingley and Jane's wedding.

"My, the shelves here are almost as full as the ones in Darcy House," observed Mr. Bennet as he made himself comfortable in the Netherfield library.

"You would have not been so impressed last year. It made Uncle Phillips's collection look inspiring," spoke Elizabeth. She scouted the room with a smile. "The renovation was necessary if Charles is to make this his home. It has turned out nicely, has it not?"

"It has. I shall not have to travel to Pemberley so often with this room a mere three miles away from Longbourn," said Mr. Bennet. For once, he turned away from the books, and paid attention to his daughter. Something had changed. He did not know whether it was because she was now Mrs. Darcy, or if was because she was a mother, or simply because his own view of her was transformed. His love for her remained, and she was still his favourite daughter. Shameful as it was to admit it, for it cast his previous mind in bad light, he reckoned the change was a newfound respect he had for Elizabeth. He had dismissed her feelings and decisions before – a mistake he would never make again. Though she stood with perfectly familiarity in Netherfield, as he had always wanted since he met Mr. Bingley, he knew that her true home was Pemberley. He was enlightened, and not only in regard to Elizabeth, but Mr. Darcy, who had recently entered the room.

"Mr. Bennet," the Derbyshire gentleman greeted before immediately

walking to his wife's side like the besotted chap Mr. Bennet was surprised to discover he was. "Elizabeth, I need your opinion on a matter concerning a tenant."

"Shall I leave you two to the library?" asked Mr. Bennet.

He saw Elizabeth read Darcy with a glance. "There is no need," spoke she. "In fact, we would like your advice, if you are willing. You know the tenants here – the ones who reside in the land bordering Longbourn."

"Ah, I will need to adjust to your ownership of the estate," said Mr. Bennet. Darcy and Elizabeth had shocked everyone by purchasing Netherfield. It was to be a part of little Charles's inheritance, as little Bennet would have Pemberley and the Darcy residence in town. Furthermore, it allowed Bingley to cease his payments for the property and buy an estate only thirty miles from Pemberley. The consequences of the Netherfield purchase could only increase Mr. Bennet's respect of Darcy, who proved a more than great provider for his children, quite unlike himself. Also unlike himself, Darcy clearly sought the opinion of his wife in the matters of his estates. Granted, Darcy was richer than he, and Elizabeth was more sensible than Mrs. Bennet, but the truth of it was that they were the best couple he ever beheld. There were some regrets on his part, for almost ruining the match. At the end of it all, he was even so fortunate that Elizabeth would be Netherfield's mistress until little Charles took a wife, and thereby she and her family would spend more time in Hertfordshire near him, as he had always desired. Thus, he ignored his inclination towards leisure and endeavoured to help Elizabeth and Darcy solve the issues of their newfound land and tenants, and do anything else they asked of him.

Mr. Bingley and Jane went on to have a harmonious marriage. It was akin to their characters. Kind-hearted as the both of them were, Elizabeth could not fathom how anyone thought that they were not meant for each other. The Bingleys remained on close terms with the Darcys, whom they were always grateful towards for bringing them together. Charles Darcy was especially loved by his Uncle Bingley, for the Bingley household boasted of daughters who took after two of their aunts, Caroline and Lydia, in personality.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had their own favourite grandchildren. To Mrs. Bennet, the Darcy heir, Bennet, could do no wrong. Mr. Bennet liked little Annabeth Darcy best, for she greatly resembled Elizabeth as a child.

Unfortunately for Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet, and Mr. Bingley, all seven of the Darcy children had a common favourite relative, and it

was their Aunt Georgiana, who loved to spoil them with sweets and tell romantic tales of their parents.

Darcy and Elizabeth truly did live happily ever after.

"You will get cold, my love," said Darcy, pulling Elizabeth away from the window and onto his lap.

Elizabeth squirmed, but Darcy did not relinquish his hold. She settled for trying to peek at the panes from her unconventional seat. "A little chill in here is nothing to what the twins are facing out there."

"They are not due to return home for at least an hour."

"Half of an hour at the least, Fitzwilliam. They are journeying from Kent, after all."

"You have a fair point. I am surprised they did not return yesterday."

"Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins would have never allowed that," said Elizabeth.

"Indeed. Sometimes I wish that we never reconciled with my aunt."

"She is a good great-aunt to our children, even if they may be wary of her manners. Oh, it looks so cold out there. I do wish Bennet and Charles will return home soon."

"Not too soon, I hope."

"Whyever not?"

Elizabeth ceased her attempts to look outside and turned to face her husband. She barely glimpsed his amused expression when he pulled her into a soft, seductive kiss. By the end of it, she was breathless.

"Mr. Darcy," she whispered.

Darcy smiled. "Mrs. Darcy."

THE END.

Acknowledgements

Jane Austen published her masterpiece, *Pride and Prejudice*, in 1813. It is her work that has inspired countless others, including this one. The love between Darcy and Elizabeth is timeless, and it is a pleasure to write a variation of their romantic story.

About the Author

Miss Kimberlyn Wyn enjoys a quiet life. Tea, sweets, and *Pride and Prejudice* are among the things she treasures.

More information, including news on book releases, available at <https://kimberlynwyn.com>.

Thank you for reading!